

Report: Pre Biennial Seminar
Location: New York and Montreal
Group: Overseas Delegates to the Montreal Biennial
Dates: April 28-May 2, 2004

Not many people will believe that twenty JCC leaders from six countries spent three intensive days in the 'Big Apple' learning about the world of JCCs, trying to squeeze in more and more meetings and not having time to even visit the well known attractions. The seminar was designed for some of the members of the overseas delegation that came to participate in the JCCA Montreal Biennial Convention. The seminar was made possible thanks to a generous grant from JDC.

These were the objectives as outlined when designing the program:

1. To gain an understanding of the North American model of a Jewish Community Center.
2. To visit Jewish Community Centers concentrating on the following areas:
 - Lay leadership development
 - Lay/professional relationships
 - Marketing and fiscal independence
 - Jewish Education: Vision and practice
3. To network and connect with the leadership of JCC Association and North American JCCs in order to establish long term partnerships

The program officially opened with a visit to the JCC Association office in New York where the group met with Allan Finkelstein, President, and Alan Mann, Executive Vice President, to discuss "Hagshama- Realizing our Future", the long-term vision of JCCs in North America. Allan Finkelstein opened by giving some information on the large scope of JCCA's work in North America. He also explained the services that are provided by JCCA as an association that was founded back in 1917. Although each JCC is independent, JCCA provides on-going consultation, organizes conferences for lay and professional leaders, helps recruit executive directors, provides actual services like the JCC Maccabi Games, the JCC Maccabi Xperience, Pirkey Avot and more. First and foremost, JCC Association leads and guides the movement. There are 120 members on the JCC Association Board of Directors. In addition, JCC Association is always looking for new ways to serve the field. A recent example that Allan gave, was central purchasing where JCC Association contracted for example with Office Depot to give discounts to all JCCs. Despite the notion of being competitive, 80% of JCC members also belong to synagogues. Allan explained why "Inspiring Jewish Journeys" was chosen as the theme for the new strategic planning as JCCs open doors Jewishly for every Jew. Both Allan Finkelstein and Alan Mann then entertained questions and comments from the participants.

The group then split into three sub-groups, each visiting another model of a JCC:

1. JCC on the Palisades, New Jersey
2. The Edith and Carl Marks JCH of Bensonhurst
3. The 92 St. 'Y'

I personally joined the third group and had a chance to see firsthand, the 92 St. Y, this renowned landmark of New York's cultural life. We first met with Lyne Guggenheim, director of development, who gave us some basic information on the JCC. She told us that there are eight centers of activity at the JCC. The overall budget is an astounding 45 million dollars per year

and about 17% of that budget goes to fundraising costs. The main focus areas of the JCC are: Arts and Culture, Jewish Education and Children Programs.

We were then escorted by Steve Siegal, the director of the Library, who has been working at the JCC for the past 25 years. Steve gave us a grand tour of the building and spoke about the history of the building. The JCC has been operating since 1874 (!) and is situated in its current location since 1930. Steve also showed us unique dormitory floors that offer housing from one month to a year thus making the JCC a home as well. We then met with Alison Grady, the director of International Relations. Alison described to us a special fellowship that is offered by the JCC where 25 Jewish communal leaders from overseas study for two and a half weeks at Columbia University concentrating on non-for-profit management. So far, people from 65 countries have attended the program, many of them directors of NGOs. It is part of the JCC's mission of Tikun Olam. Alison was excited about forming relationships with JCCs around the world who can participate in this program. Finally, we met with Leanne Wild, the assistant director of the Bronfman Center for Jewish Education. Leanne described the various programs that the JCC offers, from an intensive introduction to Judaism, which takes place at people's homes for thirty consecutive weeks to programs for interfaith couples. Leanne stressed the specialty of this department by offering Jewish programs in a non-judgmental and comfortable way where people feel safe and welcome. The JCC is closed during Shabbat and Jewish holidays.

The two other sub groups also came back inspired by what they saw in the JCCs they visited and were especially impressed by the professionals and lay leaders of the organization.

In the late afternoon the delegation was generously hosted at the home of Linda and Jerry Spitzer where they had a chance to be introduced to board members and guests of WCJCC. Steve Schawger, Allan Finkelstein and Yair Geller, three vice presidents of the WCJCC attended the meeting and addressed the lively crowd.

The next day, the entire delegation visited the JCC in Manhattan on the Upper West Side. The group met Rabbi Joy Levitt, the assistant director and one of the founders of this impressive JCC. Joy presented her ideological beliefs and told us how the JCC was established. She explained, that there was a need in the Upper West Side of Manhattan to service some 100,000 Jews who lived within walking distance of the JCC, an area where 17 synagogues operated but no JCC. The JCC began as a center without walls. The two first programs were Sunday sports leagues for children and a program for gay and lesbian Jews.

The project was made possible thanks to a strong group of lay leaders who were interested in exploring Jewish life and welcoming all Jews of all types. After working for several years without a building, eighty five million dollars were raised and the seven-storey building was built. Today there are 150 full time staff and the operating budget is 15 million dollars a year. There is a very active board where people contribute at least one of the three Ws: wealth, work or wisdom.

As Joy paraphrased it, the aim of the JCC is to widen the markers of Jewishness. All the programs are guided by a Jewish vision. Even swimming is seen as a Jewish act of keeping a body healthy. The JCC wants to make sure that the choices that Jews today make don't leave them out of organizational Jewish life. They can come in through multiple centers. Therefore, all the departments of the JCC have an intense approach to Jewish values. The JCC has a creative Shabbat policy. The building opens after 1 p.m. to allow people to visit synagogues. During the morning it offers the building at no charge to several underprivileged groups who are not Jewish. This act is seen within an ideological context of being sensitive to the community and showing

that the Jewish institution also cares about the rest of society. The programs that are offered after 1 p.m. on Shabbat are free, trying to get people out of the commercial culture.

Audrey David, a very active board member, joined the discussion and spoke about her impressions of the JCC and how important the JCC is to her. Audrey spoke about the close relationship to Israel and world Jewry. Both Audrey and Joy described a successful "Israel Non Stop" Festival. They also send several groups a year to Israel. A cultural program on Russia was initiated by Audrey upon coming back from Russia (on a visit that was organized by WCJCC and JDC.) Interestingly, even today, they still do programs outside the building in bars, parks, etc, creating programs where people are. The group then toured the building and had time to ask questions along the way.

Following this fascinating visit, the group headed to the AJJDC headquarters building for a lunch meeting with Alberto Senderey, the director of Europe and Latin America for JDC. Alberto was one of the initiators of this visit and as a long time WCJCC board member presented his vision of JCCs. Alberto specifically focused on the use of technology and presented a special web site geared to JCCs that can enhance many aspects of JCC work. Ralph Goldman, a past president and strong supporter of WCJCC and Scott Richman, the director of the FSU desk, joined the meeting and added their remarks. The lunch meeting was a good time to debrief and hear what the participants gained from the visit.

Genia Lvova from St. Petersburg spoke about seeing the JCC as a flexible model. She was impressed to see JCCs, which adjust to the situation and use different models, even different financial modes. She urged to keep the human relationship aspect of the JCC as warm and welcoming. Genia briefly described the new JCC campus that is being built in St. Petersburg.

Jorge Slafer, the president of FACCMA spoke about the JCC being open to reach out to new populations. He was also stimulated to think how to facilitate changes in his organization.

Sergio Jodorkosky from Chile, was intrigued by the lay/professional relationship. He was very impressed with the model he saw in the Pallisades. He also found many similarities and a common language.

Itzik Malka from Ashdod, Israel was interested in the business side of running a JCC, especially in aspects relating to fund raising, promotion of events etc.

Steve Schwager, the Executive Director of JDC joined the meeting and spoke about the commitment of JDC to JCCs. He also spoke about the importance to reach out to larger populations. Steve challenged the participants to go back and see the role of Jewish Education in the JCC and how they can strengthen it. As for fundraising, he just added that nobody likes to fundraise but if you don't ask you don't get. Certainly, in North America this mechanism is much more developed but certainly it could be emulated in other countries.

Alberto Senderey added that in his opinion today we are really building an international professional Jewish corps. In essence, executives need to understand global issues and can actually one day find themselves leading Jewish institutions in other countries.

Diego Freedman of JDC Argentina presented a dilemma. Should the JCC be a leader of the people or should it reflect what the community wants?

Jorge Rosental, the executive director of FACCMA spoke about the need to encourage Jewish education and strengthen the Jewish aspect of the JCCs.

Roman Winnik of CISSAB, Buenos Aires, spoke about his impressions of the visit to the Pallisades. He was impressed to see how the professionals feel so easy asking for money from the lay leaders. The budget came from fees, donations and services. Roman thought that this triple model made sense and hopefully could be implemented in Argentina.

The meeting concluded in time for the group to prepare for Shabbat. Later that evening, the group enjoyed Shabbat services at the Bnei Yeshurun Reform Synagogue in Manhattan. The group left New York Saturday night and arrived in Montreal prior to the official opening of the Biennial in order to visit the JCC in Montreal.

Montreal JCC

The visit was arranged by Linda Kislowitz the executive director and it was conducted by David Malech, the Jewish Educator and camp director of the JCC. The group toured the fine building and was very impressed with the level of facilities, both recreational and cultural. Some special components form a separate department that operates in French for the French speaking Jews. The JCC also has a unique Yiddish Theater.

The JCC operates a summer camp. There are about 700 campers and 230 counselors. It is a very successful program. There are efforts to involve the campers during the winter as well. Some other successful programs that raise money are a Fashion Show and "March to Jerusalem" at the end of a big festival. They also have a program called: "the Battle of the Bands" where six bands compete and one of their songs needs to have Jewish content.

David said that the challenge is to attract people. They are trying to do so with various programs. They feel that if people are attracted to only one or two programs, they are likely to attend other JCC programs. He thinks that a good way to attract adults is through the world of culture: theater, writing, etc.

David also described the work of the Center for Jewish Education. They have many partnerships with Jewish institutions and schools. They also run programs with the Federation. The group members had many questions to ask David and we all thanked him for his insightful comments.

The delegation then joined the Biennial Conference and participated in the WCJCC Track.

Respectfully submitted by Smadar Bar-Akiva
Thursday, 17 June 2004