

Interview with Gail Norry, Chair of Jewish Federation of North American's Emergency Committee.

Below is a transcript from an interview with Gail Norry, Chair of JFNA's Emergency discussing her experience working with the Houston Federation post-Harvey, her thoughts on the Jewish community and the resiliency we've shown over the past year.

What is your role with the Federation system, and in relation to Houston efforts?

I'm from the Philadelphia area and I've been involved – I kind of grew up involved – in the Jewish community. I went to Jewish day school, and Jewish summer camp (Camp Ramah), and I've been involved in the JCC, my bubby is at a Jewish [retirement] home, so I am very much a part of the Jewish community and I was growing up.

Then, when I was in college, I actually got involved there. There was a Federation campaign nearby. I went to school in NY – Barnard College – and Columbia had an undergraduate campaign. I first got involved, actually, in an emergency campaign to raise money for Ethiopian Jews in Operation Moses, when they were taken to Israel. I was actually glad that I was able to give my very first gift to an emergency campaign. So emergency campaigns are near and dear to my heart.

Then, when I moved back to Philadelphia, I got involved just to know people in the community, and I was having my children, and you know, wanting to give back and do something meaningful while raising my kids. It was kind of like one thing led to another. I was asked to join Young Leadership Cabinet and I was involved long enough to become the chair. At that point, I joined the women's philanthropy board and I went on to chair National Women's Philanthropy. I just saw amazing opportunities to be involved with my local Federation, I just finished being campaign chair a year ago.

And then I was actually asked by JFNA to chair the Emergency Committee. So that was obviously a big part of why I wanted to go to Houston. But I will say, I have also gone to New Orleans after Katrina many times with many groups. This is something that has always been important to me to be there when there is a Jewish community in need. I think it's the thing that I am most proud of that we do as a system.

Tell me about your experience traveling to Houston post-Harvey.

The first thing we did was go to the food bank and it was a really, really good experience. I'm doing this off the top of my head, so I don't have any statistics, but you can fill that in later. I remembered being really moved by the fact that so many more families were being helped because of the results of the hurricane than they were helping previously. We were actually there one day with Repair the World when they were announcing their new initiative there. It

was really nice to feel like we were a part of something that was going to be a larger ongoing project in addition to what we were doing.

Then, we also had the opportunity to go to the young woman's home who – she had her wedding dress hanging there as we walked in, and she had her little baby, Leo was his name. The couple was on their babymoon at the time of the hurricane and they saw their home being submerged. One of the things that was really moving to me at the time on so many levels. Obviously, she is so relatable. I mean, I've been married for 30 years, so it has already been 30 years for me, but I can't even imagine having my first home, a new baby, and all of this going on. The financial implications of whether they should stay there or if they should spend 200-250 thousand dollars to fix the house and stay in that community. Or god forbid it happens again, are they better off leaving? Part of the reason why they were there was because her husband's parents lived nearby, and it meant they were planning to spend their child there to day school when the time came. And now, they may have to change their entire plan.

You think of the immediate ramifications of property damage and having a place to go when the hurricane hits, but you don't often think about the long-term damages people have to live with.

We visited over the course of the two days some of the different Jewish institutions and synagogues. I was just so blown away by all the stories. Every family, and often multiple generations, I said that I had never heard the word flooded as a verb like that. Everybody said they had been flooded, their father, their child, there were just so many stories. It was unbelievable to see the impact throughout the Jewish community. So many of the institutions we visited will never be the same. That's something that really impacted me.

Why do you think there was such a strong response from the nationwide Jewish collective to help Houston?

I think it's something that is very relatable for all of us. Donors ask "why give to an umbrella? Why not give directly to the institutions?" This is what the national system is all about. I always use a quote when I speak about this "Kol Israel Arevim Zeh La Zeh" (each of us is responsible for one another). We feel that when we go visit a Holocaust survivor, or when we go to Israel. And now that Israel has rockets falling down on them. It happened to Houston and it can happen to anyone. I think we need to be mindful and take care of each other.

Any final thoughts or reflections to share?

I just want to emphasize and say that what was really impressed upon me was how large the recovery is. It will take years and I'm so proud of the work that we've done and the money that has been raised, but I am conscious of the fact that the job isn't done. Houston has been in my thoughts and prayers for recovery and I just want people to know that there is still opportunity to go and help and to be there for the community.