

Joanne and Arthur z”l Bluethenthal

When Arthur and I got married in 1950, he had just gotten a job in the Triad. Our sources told us that Greensboro was much more welcoming to Jews than most small towns in the area, and when we moved here we discovered that was a very good lead.

Our first friends here were active members of the Jewish community, and those people got us involved in both the Jewish and civic realms. It was an awfully nice group, albeit a small group---you had to be careful what you said because everyone was related to everyone else.

I grew up in Philadelphia, and we frequently visited my grandfather who lived in New Jersey. I remember holding his hand as I walked down the aisle of the synagogue across the street from his house and the excitement I felt because I knew that he had played a major role in building it. His understated generosity was an inspiration to me, and when he died we discovered that he had given to every Jew that ever came near him.



Arthur was born and raised in Wilmington, NC, where the Jewish community was much smaller and more insular and opportunities to participate in the larger community were somewhat limited. His family went to services regularly and celebrated all the Jewish holidays, and his parents were active in their temple. Arthur's mother was a brilliant woman, proudly a Smith College graduate in an era when very few women received a secondary education. At one point she was concerned that her children were not getting a sufficient Jewish education, so she invited all of the kids in the community to the Bluethenthal house for a secondary Sunday school.

We both came from backgrounds where involvement in the community was natural. Arthur was often preoccupied with his business, but he found plenty of time over the years to effectively put his marvelous fundraising skills to use as president of The United Way and Temple Emanuel and chairman of the Federation drive. He also volunteered to start a wrestling team at one of the high schools and later at Guilford College. I used to love when the guys would call and say, “Can I speak to Coach, please?”

If every woman who is active in Greensboro had a husband as supportive as Arthur was, we would have lots more good things going on than we have now. In addition to his own leadership roles, which he performed very modestly and very well, Arthur was always extremely supportive of my activism. I was very involved in the Civil Rights Movement in Greensboro. Desegregating the public schools was particularly important to me, and I was honored to have been appointed by the City Council to serve on the Guilford County Board of Education during that time. On nights when I would go out to visit with families in the African-American community to talk about freedom of choice, Arthur took care of our three small children.

Of all the things that I have done Jewishly, I think I am most proud of co-chairing the committee that hired Marilyn Chandler. It was not easy to get her here, but she was absolutely worth the effort.

When you are a religious minority living in a community as large as Greensboro, it is important to stand up and be proud of your differences. We believed in teaching others about Judaism, so every year we had a very large seder---so large that in recent years we have rented a room at the Painted Plate--and we have always included our non-Jewish friends so we can give them a sense of our traditions. Our grandchildren have led the seder recently, and they do a beautiful job.

There is nothing like meeting people when you are struggling toward a goal that is really beyond your own personal benefit and has a bigger impact. We were just lucky to come into Greensboro at a time when there was great change taking place here. Both of us got to know people who became our lifetime friends--people we may not have known had we not become involved. We always had a rich Jewish life--probably more of a Jewish life here than in any community we could have gone into at the time.

I always say that if you have a little energy and a little something upstairs, you do not have to be brilliant—you can be as much a part of the Greensboro community as you want to be. Though our city is growing, it is still that small town that enables people to use their talents creatively. I certainly hope it remains that way.