

# Passion and Purpose: A View From My Chair

Sharon Kenigsberg | Director of Community Development, Jewish Long Beach

As many of you have been reading in these pages over the past several months about the plans to integrate Jewish Long Beach with the Alpert Jewish Community Center (AJCC), I felt it was a fitting time to tell my Jewish Long Beach Story since my almost 40-year career spans both agencies.

My story begins in 1981 when my husband, Marty, a clinical psychologist, accepted a job at the Long Beach VA and we moved to Garden Grove. In July of that year, our son Adam arrived. When I first moved here, I was not sure where “the Jews” were but I soon heard that there was a Jewish Community Center (JCC) on Willow. When Adam was 18 months old, I called up the JCC preschool to inquire about the Mommy and Me classes. I asked the director so many questions about the curriculum and shared with her that I had some experience in this area, so she asked if I wanted to teach the class. I accepted and thus began my professional relationship with the community. This was a perfect fit for me as my educational background was in Child Development and Family Studies with a Masters Degree in Education.

I also volunteered with the Center Players, which was the JCC adult drama group. Through my participation in Pajama Game, Guys and Dolls, and California Suite I met a number of the people in the community who are still part of my world today. As a side note, many of you are part of my story and I apologize in advance that I cannot mention individual names. The entire page would just be names if I were to list all who have nurtured, mentored, inspired and befriended me over the years (but you know who you are).

In 1984, there was an opening at the JCC for a Youth, Teen, Family and Camp Director and thus began my full time career as a Jewish Communal Professional. My memories of directing Camp Kadimah are especially sweet. The ruach (spirit), camaraderie, and dedication of the staff, parents and campers was amazing. It is heartwarming to now see children who were our campers coming back to the AJCC and bringing their kids to pre-school and those of you who were parents of campers back then are now grandparents, and still devoted to leading this community.



From top, left: Sandy Horwitz, Anne Licht (of blessed memory), and Sharon with campers at JDC summer camp in the Ukraine.

I have always loved Judaism and being Jewish. I attribute much of that to the education I received growing up at a conservative congregation, Sharee Shamayim, in Philadelphia. My aunt lived next door to the shul and the Rabbi lived next door to her. Many holidays were celebrated in both houses. I was also inspired by my grandmothers. My mother’s mother, Florence Goliger Hyman, was an ardent Zionist. I remember her making trips to Israel in the sixties to visit her uncle even though she did not have much money. She would talk about Israel and was always reading a book with Jewish content. My father’s mother, Anna Bernstein Finkelstein, was more traditional and



The Israeli Kenigsberg's in 2016. Left to right, starting in the back: Hudi, Shimon, Adam, Sarah, Avraham and Eli (not pictured Natan, born in 2017).

very spiritual. I would light Shabbat candles and attend services with her and she would lament that the grandchildren did not speak Yiddish. My parents were not as religious but certainly cared about our Jewish identity. We were part of large extended family with fun-filled Jewish holiday and life-cycle celebrations.

While I thrived in Hebrew school and was a leader, it was a different situation when

I moved to a new public school in the Philadelphia suburbs in sixth grade. People treated me differently. I had black hair and a strange (to them) last name (Finkelstein) that people made fun of. At the tender age of 11, I learned firsthand about antisemitism. That made my connection to my temple friends, B'nai Brith Youth Organization, and other Jewish activities even more important to me.



Phyllis, Marty, Sharon, Sharon's mom, Lois Finkelstein, celebrating Sharon's 15 years of service at the 2015 Annual Meeting.

As parents, Marty and I are proud that Jewish life is also important to our children, Adam and Phyllis. In their early years, they were part of the JCC through early childhood education, camp, summer stock, and for Phyllis, the JCC Brownie troop. They both attended and later returned as counselors at local Jewish resident camps and the Bureau of Jewish Education programs. Adam’s path took him to study and obtain smicha (rabbinic ordination) from Ohr Reuven Yeshiva in Monsey, New York. He, his wife Hudi and our five grandchildren live in Israel. Phyllis majored in Judaic Studies and was very active in Hillel at the University of Arizona. After college she worked at Beach Hillel for a few years. Phyllis and her husband, A.J. Klein live in San Jose and are active members of their synagogue. Our special needs son, Max, spent some time in a Jewish affiliated group home.

It is not often that one can have a career that combines working with people you enjoy, and also feeds your soul.

I am lucky that I was able to continue to pursue my passion to serve the Jewish people. From 1989-1999, I continued my Jewish Communal Professional journey with positions at Temple Beth Sholom in Santa Ana and the Jewish Federation of Orange County. In 1999, there was an opportunity to return to Long Beach as the Director of Financial Resource Development for the Jewish Federation and Jewish Community Foundation (now Jewish Long Beach). It was exciting to be working back in my home community in a brand new building and I have literally been in the same chair for the last twenty-two years (albeit with a few changes to my job title along the way).

My life has also been enriched by the many opportunities to meet colleagues throughout the world and connect with individuals who were served by the Jewish Agency for Israel and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). These are agencies that your annual donations help support. Through the many missions, community trips, partnership programs, conferences, etc., I learned the importance of Klal Yisrael – we are all one people. Peoplehood is the glue that connects us all, no matter where we live, what language we speak, or which way we express our Judaism. There have been so many transformative moments experienced on the trips to Israel and Europe that it would take another whole story to tell. But one particular highlight was in 2001 on a Campaign Chairs and Directors Mission to Kharkov, Ukraine. The pensioners in the former Soviet Union depended upon monthly food boxes sent to them by JDC. As part of our mission, our group walked up several flights of dark stairs to bring a box to a couple who were not destitute but still needed the help. I will never forget the woman opening the door and being overwhelmed to see us. She said, “You came all the way from America! Why do you care about us?” That for me summed up why I do what I do and why Jewish Long Beach and all our agencies and synagogues are so important. The Jewish people continues because we care what happens to all of us.

As I look towards retiring from full time work in early 2022, I am so happy that our community is embarking on this new chapter with the integration of organizations. We are asking everyone to “Dream With Us.” My dream is that this wonderful community that was built with love, hard work and the talents of dedicated volunteers and staff will be here for our great-grandchildren and beyond. So as part of this dream, I am encouraging all of you to think about your legacy to the community. Everyone can leave something. I implore you to call me over the next few months. Let’s have a conversation about your dreams to ensure our Jewish future.

Debbie Friedman sums it up best in the song World of Your Dreams:

*May you see your world created in your lifetime*

*May you see your visions come to be*

*May your hope touch every generation to come*

*These are the prayers we have for you.*

Amen and thank you.

