

GETTING TO KNOW YOU: *Jewish Federation of Greater Toledo Staff:* Mary Bilyeu, Community Relations Programming Specialist



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Toledo Jewish News: Can you describe your main responsibilities in your new role?

Mary Bilyeu: As the Community Relations Programming Specialist, I'll be working about 70% of the time with Daniel Pearlman and the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC); the remaining 30% of the time will be spent with Ben Malczewski and Jewish Senior, Family and Social Services (JSFSS). That means I'll be engaging in intra- and inter-faith bridge building and friend-raising (rather than fundraising!), working on social justice issues, and engaging with my fellow seniors in fun and educational ways. It's a bit of

a mishmash of all the areas and people I'm passionate about, so I'm very excited for this opportunity!

TJN: What led you to this type of work?

MB: I was *The Blade's* Food Editor for 9 years, and my pages reflected the issues that matter to me: diversity, faith traditions, alleviating hunger, community service, education. So, I really feel that my work with Federation is simply a continuation of that, but through a different lens and with more engagement, rather than simply writing and reporting.

TJN: What energizes you at work?

MB: Putting pieces of the puzzle together, as it were – linking my community connections to Federation, watching plans come to fruition, meeting new people who can offer interesting programming. All our experiences – mine, my colleagues', my friends, etc. – all forming a cohesive whole that enhances our lives and our work.

TJN: Do you have a favorite memory or accomplishment at work (in a previous role) that you're most proud of?

MB: I have so many wonderful memories of the people I met, and stories I was privileged to tell, while working at *The Blade*. I had so many extraordinary experiences, from meeting world-famous chefs (Ferran Adria blew me a kiss after signing a book at an event, and I chatted about delis with Thomas Keller) to having a 95-year-old woman at a local church share special pinchers with me to make Lebanese cookies. Her late husband had made a set of these tools for her, and she entrusted me with one so she could show me how to make the distinctive design in the treats. I was so touched and honored! I could truly go on and on and on about how kind and generous the Toledo community has been to me, all via the entrée (pun intended!) of food.

TJN: What is something a *Toledo Jewish News* reader may not know about you?

MB: Let's see... I'm a food writer who's had no journalistic or culinary training! I started at the University of Michigan (Go Blue!) in the pre-med program before transferring to English (with a heavy emphasis on linguistics). I also attended a Jewish nursery school in New York City, where I grew up – despite later spending 13 years in Catholic schools – because it was around the corner from our apartment and thus very convenient. I still remember loving matzah with grape jelly, which is a very vivid taste memory all these decades later.

TJN: What is something you saw recently that made you smile?

MB: Instagram is my happy place, because my feed is full of Great British Bake-Off contestants' creations, playful kittens, yawning puppies, fluffy bunnies, and baby goats. You can't look at decadent desserts and all that cuteness without smiling!

TJN: What is the best compliment you have ever received?

MB: At a previous job, I was told that the place had been very warm and welcoming before I was hired, but that once I was established there, I had taken it even further: I had made the place "haymish." I am still so humbled by such a kind thought, many years later!

TJN: What are three words your closest family and friends would use to describe you?

MB: Crazy cat lady!

TJN: What is one of your favorite family traditions?

MB: The evening before my son was born, my was-band (ex-husband) and I ate Chinese food for dinner. Every year since – which is more than 30 years, now! – we've all had Chinese food on the night before Jeremy's birthday, no matter where we are in the world. And the tradition has continued, now that he has his own son; he and his wife ate burgers and nachos for dinner before my now-2-year-old grandson was born. So, Jacob's birthday celebration begins at night, too, with burgers and/or nachos as the meal ahead of his big day.