



Pushing the Boundaries: Disability, Inclusion and Jewish Community: A Canadian Context

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By Robin Gofine, Linda Kislowicz, Liv Mendelson, and Susie Sokol

Two years ago, four Canadian Jewish organizations (Jewish Federations Canada-UJA, UJA Federation of Greater Toronto, D.A.N.I.; and the Miles Nadal JCC) came together to mobilize their respective constituencies and look at the Jewish Canadian perspective on disability and inclusion. We wanted to ignite a national conversation and focus on the uniquely Canadian aspects of these issues, leveraging the opportunities afforded to us through our federations, provincial and federal legislation, and our health and social welfare system. Like so many of our partners and colleagues at the Ruderman Family Foundation, JFNA and the Jewish Funders Network, the time had come to focus upon this topic as an important part of the Canadian Jewish communal agenda.

We knew that we had a lot to share and a lot to learn. The unique attributes and aspects of Canadian history, legislation and society, offered an important context and lens through which to advance this conversation and build on the momentum taking place in communities across the country. Toronto is home to the largest Jewish community in Canada and UJA's new community campuses are built to the highest standards of accessibility, making the Sherman Campus at UJA's Lipa Green Centre an obvious choice of venue. We knew that we wanted to do more than just talk- we wanted to see follow up and action. Through a generous grant from the Azrieli Foundation, and the participation of the passionate voices and expertise of the participants we have been able to accomplish all of this and more.

We set out to *Push the Boundaries* and we succeeded in breaking barriers. We made history by hosting the first ever Canadian Jewish conference on disability and inclusion. Over 150 professionals, parents, advocates, philanthropists and community members gathered from all over Canada, the United States and Israel to be inspired, to learn and to network. Not even an unseasonable ice storm and challenging travel conditions could keep this conference from proceeding. Critical conversations lead by Canadian experts on housing, employment and education ensured that participants could learn, make connections and initiate new opportunities in their home communities. Universal topics on such issues as inclusive recreational programs, dating and relationships, advocacy, synagogue life and aging and disability exposed participants to best practice in the field. The focus upon innovations in Israel reminded and enabled us to take pride and inspiration from our beloved Israel- particularly appropriate on the eve of *Yom HaZikaron* and *Yom Haatzmaut*.

Highlights include:

- Being inspired by our keynote speaker, disability rights activist Diane Richler, (member of the Order of Canada – Canada's highest civic honour) who traced the disabilities rights movement over the past century
- Learning from Rabbi Ruti Regan who taught us that "access speaks louder than words"
- Being entertained by Pamela Schuller, a standup comedian, whose wit and humour about living with Tourette's had us all in stitches. But more importantly we gained incredible insight and respect for her perseverance and creativity
- Listening to Ari Ne'eman, who reminded us of the history that has brought us to the understanding that people with disabilities have the right to live, work, play and go to school like everyone else, and reminded us of that inclusion is a Jewish value
- Tapping into the Access Now app developed by Maayan Ziv, a dynamic young Toronto-based activist born with muscular dystrophy who shared that people are not disabled – environments are disabling. This perspective was the impetus in developing this widely used app which uses crowd sourcing to identify accessible venues around the world

The conference attendees left energized and excited about the future. They felt connected, and hopeful about the future. Clearly the work has only just begun. There will be a follow up phase that will assist communities to grow their capacities to be more inclusive. Plans are underway to continue the work. We know that building Jewish inclusive communities requires collaboration- across organizations, across sectors, across borders and that we all need to be

pulling in the same direction to effect change and have an impact.

Nothing about us, without us! An aspirational goal indeed!

Robin Gofine is VP, Strategic Community Planning and Engagement, UJA Federation of Greater Toronto; Linda Kislowicz, is President and CEO, Jewish Federations of Canada-UJA; Liv Mendelson is Director of Accessibility and Inclusion, Miles Nadal JCC & Artistic Director, ReelAbilities Toronto Film Festival; and Susie Sokol is Founder and Director of Dani (Developing and Nurturing Independence) and Chair, Toronto Jewish Disability Network.