

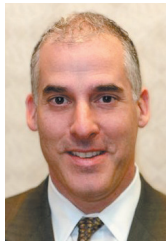
Detroit Journalism COOPERATIVE

Detroit's Jewish community reconnects with 'the old neighborhood' to offer helping hand

By Aaron Foley
New Michigan Media

Local conversations about suburban residents coming to the city of Detroit tend to revolve around downtown and Midtown, as if there's a transporting device that beams crowds of people for sporting events, concerts and the like. Do residents from the 'burbs ever come to less alluring places in the city and work collaboratively with Detroiters to strengthen their neighborhoods?

They do, and in increasing numbers, from Detroit's Jewish community. Project Healthy Community, born from a sermon by Temple Israel Rabbi Josh Bennett, is expanding at a steady clip. Since its inception last spring, more initiatives have been added, more volunteers have stepped up, more community members have benefitted and more people are taking notice.



Rabbi Joshua Bennett

With Detroit's bankruptcy and uncertain road to recovery as a backdrop, Rabbi Bennett delivered a sermon last year at the West Bloomfield-based temple (that was founded in Detroit), inviting congregants to return to "the old neighborhood," extending an opportunity for members of the Jewish

community who had grown up – or had family ties in – in northwest Detroit to perform ongoing community service in the area. "It's the idea of social justice that we as Jews should care about," Bennett says, reflecting on the sermon.

Bennett and a few others would approach the Northwest Activities Center, a facility that 40 years ago was the Jewish Community Center, about service there. "We really started off with just a team of five or six of us."

Now, the work in the community has ballooned to hundreds of volunteers assisting just as many families in the area. Volunteers initially focused on the pantry at the Northwest Activities Center, restructuring it for more healthy offerings and better methods of food preparation.

While the largest and most extensive of the Jewish community's initiatives to collaborate with Detroiters in their own neighborhoods, Project Healthy Community is not the first. Hundreds of volunteers from the Jewish community continue to be involved in child and adult literacy programs associated with many northwest Detroit schools, including Pasteur, Hampton and Bagley.

Dr. Melvyn Rubenfire, along with his late wife, Diane, heard Rabbi Bennett's sermon and took action. Currently a cardiologist at the University of Michigan health system, Dr. Rubenfire prompted initiatives to talk to Detroiters about nutrition and health risks. It wasn't easy at first; no one wanted to be lectured to, he said.



Dr. Melvyn Rubenfire

But by September of last year, "the people who were coming through the line said 'how can I help?'" Rubenfire says. Rubenfire's commitment to northwest Detroit stems from decades of service to its residents while at Sinai Hospital, where he was its long-time chief of cardiology.

The rapid development of programs at Northwest Activities Center, Hartford Memorial Baptist Church, the Bagley neighborhood, MacDowell and Schultz elemen-



Ron Lockett, executive director and CEO of the Northwest Activity Center; Lisa Corey of Birmingham; Warren Crockett of Detroit; Dr. Melvyn Rubenfire of West Bloomfield; Karen Sherbin of Farmington Hills; Rabbi Josh Bennett of Temple Israel; Andre Peterson of Gleaners

tary schools and other locations now includes the revamped "global" pantry; a summer camp in the city; an urban garden; a "healthy backpack" program, where children's backpacks are filled with food weekly to supplement meals at home; the "fun pantry," where students are taught about the food groups and farm-to-fork methods; dental and other health clinics; a fellowship for a master's-level student who acts as a program director for several of the directives; and a partnership with the AARP to assist elderly members of the community.

"In the beginning, we started giving them food at the end of the day," Bennett says. "Literally, it's a monumental change from when we started. There are hundreds and hundreds of volunteers making a huge difference in the city."

Initially, the vast majority of the program's volunteers were from Oakland County. Now, a third of volunteers are estimated to be from Oakland County and the western Wayne County suburbs, another third are Northwest Detroit community members and another third are high school and college volunteers.

The program relies on partnerships with Gleaners Community Food Bank, Forgotten Harvest and the Jewish Fund, the latter of which now provides \$20,000 annually for a part-time administrative assistant.

That the service has gone this long uninterrupted couldn't have been predicted at its start, when there was unspoken tension between suburban residents and city dwellers.

"Nobody was willing to sort of say it out loud," Bennett says. "We didn't hear it off the bat, but there was definitely, there are cultural differences in terms of the way our communities worked, and there was real animosity in the relationships."

The barriers began breaking down slowly. Interfaith services were held at Hartford Memorial Baptist Church and Temple Israel. "A group of women from Hartford attended our Passover Seder," Bennett cites as one example.

Rubenfire adds that suburban volunteers had to make clear early on that they were not there to "take over."

"The vision is an interfaith, intergenerational mechanism to get large numbers of volunteers to get communities to help themselves," Rubenfire says.

Other Jewish communities are watching. Bennett says he has been approached by Chicagoland Jews wondering about going back to their "old neighborhoods" in the same fashion as Metro Detroiters.

In the meantime, Project Healthy Community is continuing to expand, including laying the groundwork now to hand out at least 1,000 turkeys at Thanksgiving.

Perhaps the project's biggest accomplishment is bringing people across borders, both physical and cultural, in the midst of Detroit's financial, social and political distress.

"When we come in there, everybody's in Levi's. Everybody's in a T-shirt. And it's just a lovefest. Everybody's hugging everybody else," Rubenfire says.

About this series

Five minority media outlets with a combined estimated circulation of 120,000 weekly—Latino Press, The Michigan Citizen, The Jewish News, The Michigan Korean Weekly, The Arab American News—are part of New Michigan Media and are taking part in The Detroit Journalism Cooperative (DJC). Funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Renaissance Journalism's Michigan Reporting Initiative and the Ford Foundation, the DJC aims to report about and create community engagement opportunities pertaining to the Detroit bankruptcy and recovery. Each article in the series appears in all the NMM member newspapers. This article is from THE DETROIT JEWISH NEWS. The DJC is a unique collaboration between important media outlets of the region, and includes The Center for Michigan's Bridge Magazine, Detroit Public Television, Michigan Public Radio, WDET and New Michigan Media. The Detroit Free Press is also participating in the DJC effort.