



InterfaithFamily.com

Encouraging Jewish Choices

Update from the Network - Fall 2003

We're pleased to provide the second of our regular reports on our progress in fulfilling InterfaithFamily.com's mission: to **empower interfaith families to make Jewish choices** for themselves and their children, and to **encourage the Jewish community to be welcoming** of interfaith families.

Through our **website** and our **advocacy membership association**, the InterfaithFamily.com Network, we **provide supportive educational information, build community, connect interfaith families to local Jewish communities, and advocate for inclusive attitudes, policies and practices.**

In the past six months, while maintaining our ongoing activities--and with our Internet magazine's fresh content every two weeks attracting record high numbers of readers--we successfully completed two major projects: launching our new organization and program listing service, ***PlanitJewish/InterfaithFamily.com Connections In Your Area***, and conducting the InterfaithFamily.com Network's public awareness campaign, the ***"We're Interfaith Families... Connecting with Jewish Life" Essay Contest.***

Providing Supportive Educational Information

Readership on our website continues to reach new highs: we had **over 50,000 visitor sessions** for the first time in September and we continue to attract nearly **20,000 monthly users**--an **increase of 80%** over the past year. Our book, ***The Guide to Jewish Interfaith Family Life: An InterfaithFamily.com Handbook*** (Jewish Lights) continues to be reviewed and to sell well.

Since April 2003, in addition to covering weddings, relationships, and the High Holidays, we've had special two-part series on interdating, gay interfaith relationships, and divorce and step-families, plus a special issue to announce the winners of our Essay Contest, and a special issue about welcoming synagogues for the Reform Movement's Biennial and in honor of 25 years of Reform Jewish Outreach. We recently updated our ***Archive***, which now contains over 600 articles on every subject of interest to people in interfaith relationships. We welcome your input--please contact our editor, Ronnie Friedland, at ronnief@interfaithfamily.com, if you're interested in writing or to suggest topics you'd like us to address.

Building Community

We continue to hear from readers that InterfaithFamily.com **makes them feel that they are not alone** and that **learning how others have dealt with situations** is most helpful to them. Our moderated online discussions boards continue to be a place where readers actively "talk" with and learn from each other. We also build community when we help numbers of readers connect to local outreach programs.

We'd like to add to our online community building by offering list serve discussion groups (which allow people to subscribe to an email list of all messages sent and respond to them). In addition, the InterfaithFamily.com Network enables members to meet one another not only online, but also in

person in their local communities, and as we add members, we'd like to facilitate formation of such groups.

Connecting Interfaith Families to Local Jewish Communities

With generous funding from the Richard & Rhoda Goldman Fund, in partnership with another non-profit, PlanitJewish.com, and after months of planning and testing, in September we launched **PlanitJewish/InterfaithFamily.com Connections In Your Area**. This powerful new interactive, searchable organization listing and program calendar allows our readers to search for welcoming organizations and particular types of events in their local communities across North America, register to receive weekly reminders of programs of the type they are interested in, invite friends to events, provide feedback, view photos of events, and more. At the launch we had over 110 listing organizations, and in September after very little publicity we had 1,568 unique visitors and 3,715 visitor sessions to the new system.

Connections In Your Area will be very attractive to any Jewish organization that wants to indicate its interest in our growing readership of interfaith families. Each listing organization has its own "Organization Page," on which it can put any information it wishes, including photos and links to its own website, and the contact person from each organization can enter its program information. Dru Greenwood, the Reform Movement's national outreach director, has encouraged the entire Reform outreach community to use the system to publicize their programs. The Jewish Community Center Association recently added us as a "Program Partner," which will help us attract local JCC's to list their programs. Kathy Bloomfield, our director of community development, is actively involved in promoting use of **Connections In Your Area** by federations, family service agencies, bureaus of Jewish education, synagogues, Hillels--by any Jewish organization that welcomes the participation of interfaith families.

Connections In Your Area will also help Jewish outreach professionals keep abreast of the current programming offered by their colleagues all over North America, stimulating collaboration and program development. In that connection, we implemented a list serve discussion group, the **InterfaithFamily.com Network Program Providers Circle**, as an efficient means for us to communicate with these professionals about how to best use the **Connections In Your Area** system, and for them to share program ideas and materials.

Advocating for Inclusive Attitudes, Policies and Practices

The InterfaithFamily.com Network continues its work as **the leading grass-roots advocate for a Jewish community that is welcoming and inclusive of interfaith families**. Our most important advocacy activity over the past six months was the Network's "**We're Interfaith Families... Connecting with Jewish Life**" **Essay Contest**, a campaign to raise public awareness made possible by generous support from the Walter & Elise Haas Fund.

We offered a \$1,000 grand prize as well as additional prizes for personal stories of Jewish engagement and identity in categories for parents, grandparents, children of intermarried parents, and others involved in interfaith relationships. We're extremely pleased with the results of the contest, in every respect.

First, the contest attracted wide publicity when it was announced in April, including a very favorable story in the *New York Jewish Week*, reprinted in other publications, that captured exactly what we hoped to accomplish:

...the contest seeks to counter the widespread assumption that intermarriage signals "the loss of Jewish identity and involvement" and instead to give people in interfaith families the opportunity to tell "the personal stories of their involvement in Jewish life." "This will produce many stories of positive involvement in Jewish life by interfaith families ... Hopefully it will attract people who are thinking of getting involved but are unsure and hopefully it will also

persuade Jewish leaders that they ought to be doing whatever they can to get more involvement in Jewish life by interfaith families.”

Next, we received over 130 wonderful entries that exceeded these expectations, and our distinguished panel of judges, who represented diverse parts of the Jewish community, chose deeply personal and insightful winning essays that were published in a special issue of our Internet magazine on September 12. We’re planning to have all of the essays published in a book.

Finally, the results of the year 2000 National Jewish Population Survey coincidentally were announced on September 10, and as a result the Essay Contest news attracted wide publicity. Our “op-ed” piece titled “**Learning from Interfaith Families**” appeared in the *New York Jewish Week’s* October 10 issue; in response to the survey’s continuing high rate of intermarriage, we highlighted the lessons that can be drawn from the Essay Contest by anyone interested in increasing the engagement of interfaith families in Jewish life. This was precisely the kind of message that we had hoped the contest would have.

In the past six months we also had occasional letters to the editor published, for example in *The Canadian Jewish News* countering a rabbi’s argument that intermarried Jews (along with their non-Jewish partners) should be denied membership in Conservative synagogues, and in the *New York Jewish Week* in response to an opinion column that cited unhappy marriages and high divorce rates as “compelling arguments for in-marriage.”

One of our main challenges continues to be **increasing membership in the Network**. The number of “**Subscribers**”--people to whom we send our bi-weekly “e-letters” announcing new issues of our Internet magazine--increased in the past six months from 5,400 to 6,500. We now have over 225 “**Associate Members,**” who give us their name and mail address and ask to be included among the people that the Network represents, and over 425 “**Supporting Members,**” who in addition make an annual dues contribution of \$36 or more. If you’re not a Supporting Member yet--we’d love to have you join us!

Getting the Word Out

Marketing continues to be a major challenge and opportunity. While we’re pleased with our steady significant growth in readership, we need to greatly expand awareness of InterfaithFamily.com in the one million interfaith families in North America. Here are some of the ways we’ve done that in the past six months:

- We continue to monitor our search engine placement so that when people put most keywords that relate to our work into search engines, we come up high in the results.
- We continue to generate press stories, most recently about the Essay Contest results, and also appeared on a Channel 7 (Boston’s CBS affiliate) TV show, “Jewish Perspective” (the interview can now be viewed on our website)
- We’ve started to make “Learning from Interfaith Families” presentations based on the Essay Contest results in various locations, including at a Reform synagogue in Portland, Maine on September 5, at a Reform synagogue in Schenectady, New York on October 19, and at a federation-supported conference on intermarriage in Whippany, New Jersey on October 26, and expect to make similar presentations in the coming months.
- Kathy Bloomfield conducted two workshops (to rave reviews) at the Conference for Advancement of Jewish Education conference in August (one on talking to teens about interdating and one about welcoming children of diverse backgrounds in Jewish classrooms.
- We had a booth at the Reform Movement’s biennial convention in Minneapolis in November where we handed out a “synagogue kit” explaining what InterfaithFamily.com can do for synagogues and what we’d like them to do for us (including handing out our new brochure and linking their websites to ours).
- We continue to maintain and develop relationships with Jewish organizations, focusing now on adding them to **Connections In Your Area**.

Making Our Work Possible

InterfaithFamily.com depends on grants and tax-deductible charitable contributions to make our work possible. We enjoy the support of an involved Board of Directors, an Advisory Board, and other individuals, as well as institutional funders including the Richard & Rhoda Goldman Fund, the Walter & Elise Haas Fund, Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston, and the Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Foundation.

Like most non-profits facing a difficult fund-raising environment, we need to expand our individual and foundation support. We operate under a Long-Range Plan developed in mid-2002, and our "core" expense budget for 2004 is \$250,000. Funding permitting, we would increase 2004 expenses to \$320,000, and to \$425,000 by 2005, to accomplish our Long-Range Plan objectives.

Much Remains to be Done

In the Jewish Telegraphic Agency's lead story that appeared in numerous Jewish papers, we were **the first "pro-outreach" voice commenting on the National Jewish Population Survey results.** Only the initial data relating to intermarriage has been released, and more studies will be distributed in coming months. The Jewish community will again be considering what actions to take in response to the continuing high rate of intermarriage, and the InterfaithFamily.com Network will play a leading role in that process. Unfortunately, important Jewish leaders continue to express extremely negative attitudes towards intermarriage and outreach to the intermarried, most recently in the new "Jewish In-Marriage Initiative," so **our advocacy as a strong pro-outreach voice is now as important as ever.**

Our position remains unique among the national organizations working to make the Jewish communal response to intermarriage a positive one. InterfaithFamily.com **is the only national organization that focuses on reaching, working with and encouraging interfaith families themselves, and advocating on a grass-roots level as their "voice"**--a voice that must continue to be heard.

On the positive side, we often hear from grateful readers thanking us for the resources and services that we provide (these are some recent actual comments):

- "where were you when we needed you years ago?"
- "your book is a great resource"
- "you provide a wonderful service to so many people everywhere--your website is a blessing!"
- "thank you for helping us find a welcoming temple"
- "thank you for being the 'keeper of our stories.'"

In addition, our message is getting through to more and more Jewish leaders. Barry Shrage, president of Boston's Combined Jewish Philanthropies, recently told us:

The North American Jewish community's response to intermarriage is critically important to the community's ongoing vitality. Your advocacy on behalf of interfaith families is important in shaping that response in positive directions... Good luck with all of your efforts...

We Welcome Your Interest

InterfaithFamily.com today is a unique and critically important resource and service to interfaith families and to the Jewish community, and we are poised to expand our important message of welcome to a vastly larger audience. We welcome your interest and support. To learn more about our work, please contact Kathy Bloomfield at kathyb@interfaithfamily.com, or 617 581 6843.