

## InterfaithFamily/Chicago First Year Report

### Introduction

The field of engaging interfaith families Jewishly requires three elements: a world class website, inclusivity training of Jewish professionals and lay leaders, and comprehensive programs in local communities. That was the conclusion of a consortium of national funders in 2008, and of a Task Force of the UJA-Federation of New York in 2011.

InterfaithFamily (IFF) provides what is required:

- IFF is the central web address for people in interfaith relationships interested in Jewish life, with close to 640,000 annual unique visitors, growing at 30% a year, accessing helpful content and connections through our officiation referral service, our Network listings, and social networking functionality.
- Since 2010 IFF has provided trainings for clergy, synagogue staff, and religious school and preschool directors and teachers.
- In 2011 IFF launched InterfaithFamily/Your Community, an initiative to coordinate and provide a comprehensive set of interfaith engagement programs in local communities.

With generous funding from the Crown Family Philanthropies, the Marcus Foundation, the Jack and Goldie Wolfe Miller Fund, and a private gift, IFF launched InterfaithFamily/Chicago, the first two-year pilot of the initiative, in July 2011. We are pleased to report that after the first year of operation for IFF/Chicago is on track to meet all objectives.

### Objectives

The objectives of InterfaithFamily/Chicago are:

1. Through a Chicagoland Community Page, robust listings on the IFF Network, and active discussion boards, social media, and traditional PR, people in interfaith relationships will become aware of and will connect with Chicago Jewish community resources and with others like them.
2. Through increased visibility of IFF's officiation referral service, personalized responses to requests, and support for clergy, the process of finding clergy will be enhanced and clergy will stay connected with the couples for whom they officiate, helping keep them connected to Jewish life and community.
3. Through inclusivity and sensitivity trainings, and ongoing affinity groups on the IFF Network, Jewish professionals and organizations will learn to attract, welcome, and engage people in interfaith relationships.
4. Through our hybrid online/in-person *Love and Religion* workshop (originated by Marion Usher, Ph.D.), new couples will learn how to talk about and have religious traditions in their lives together.
5. Through our hybrid online/in-person classes – *Raising a Child with Judaism in Your Interfaith Family*, already offered, and *Preparing for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah in Your Interfaith Family*, to be offered in the second year – people in interfaith relationships will learn how – and why – to live Jewishly.

Each objective has specific numeric goals in terms of numbers of listings, participants in trainings, workshops and classes, etc.

## 1. Publicizing Jewish Community Resources

Rabbi Ari Moffic, Director of IFF/Chicago, introduced IFF/Chicago this year in meetings with more than sixty local organizations and professionals, including:

- the [Jewish United Fund](#) (the Chicago Federation) and its projects including [PJ Library](#) and the Board of Rabbis;
- community agencies including the [JCC](#), [Jewish Child & Family Services](#), the [Community Foundation for Jewish Education](#), the [BJE](#), and [Spertus](#);
- at least eleven Reform synagogues, as well as the URJ's local staff at [Reform Jewish Chicago](#), and the Reform Chicago area teachers' group and Berit Milah Board;
- at least five Conservative synagogues, as well as the local Rabbinical Assembly, Jewish Educators Assembly, and the [Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs](#);
- one Reconstructionist, one Humanist, and several other independent synagogues, minyans; and professionals; and
- youth workers including staff at Hillels, the Jewish Student Union, the JUF's Teen Visioning initiative, and the National Council of Synagogue Youth (Orthodox).

Rabbi Moffic participated in numerous adult education and program sessions for PJ Library, Rabbi Lizzi Heydemann's [Mishkan Chicago](#), a [JCC Kehilla](#) Shabbat dinner, classes at three synagogues including [Anshe Emet's](#) Jews By Choice class and one for the Interfaith Union's Family School, and a [Secular Humanist Colloquium](#) and a local [Interfaith Council panel](#) on interfaith marriage.

We created a [Chicagoland Community Page](#) on the InterfaithFamily Network. We add regularly to a Chicago blog with posts by Rabbi Moffic and by two Chicago residents we recruited to write for IFF's Parenting Blog. We actively use Twitter and send a customized email newsletter to publicize Chicago organizations and events. IFF/Chicago was featured in a story in [the Chicago Tribune](#), in a local community paper, and in the [JUF News](#).

As a result of this activity:

- the percentage of traffic to IFF's website from Illinois (the vast majority from Chicago) increased from 4.6% to 5.11%, representing 36,559 visits during the year, with the Chicagoland Community Page visited over 3,200 times, and
- we now have 72 organizations listed on the Network (an increase of 46 over the course of the year), 70 professionals (an increase of 56), 31 clergy on our officiation referral list (an increase of 15), 241 non-professional individuals from Chicago on the Network (an increase of 154), and 399 email newsletter subscribers (an increase of 165).

## 2. Enhancing the Officiation Experience

During the first year we responded to 103 requests for help finding clergy for weddings and other life cycle events (bris/baby-naming, bar/bat mitzvah, conversion, and funerals) plus counseling. Rabbi Moffic sent personal emails offering to be of personal assistance, in

addition to the more automated email response that identifies the clergy we recommend, and had at least twenty-four follow-up conversations by email, phone, and at least five personal meetings. Her goal in all of these communications it to connect couples beyond their wedding ceremony to synagogues and other community resources.

One father thanked Rabbi Moffic for helping get his son enrolled in a synagogue's bar mitzvah program:

“Without our meeting I never would have reached out to [the] rabbi one more time. So thank you.”

A young adult with whom Rabbi Moffic met wrote to her,

“Thank you very, very much for taking time out of your day to meet with me, and for offering yourself up as such a kind and insightful sounding board. It was really helpful for me to voice my concerns to you and discuss the larger ramifications of the decisions/issues now facing [us] as a couple.”

We began to help officiating clergy stay connected with their couples this year by creating two letters they can customize and send out, one about putting up a mezuzah and one about having a Shabbat dinner. The two resources are available to members of our [Resource Center for Jewish Clergy](#).

### **3. Trainings**

We conducted seven trainings for 80 participants, including religious school teachers at three synagogues and preschool teachers at two synagogues, a workshop for rabbis to discuss wedding officiation, and a two-day training with three sessions at the [Community Foundation for Jewish Education's Principals' Kallah](#) for Reform and Conservative synagogue religious school educators.

JESNA is our evaluation consultant and will be administering surveys, conducting follow-up interviews, and issuing a report in 2013. In the meantime JESNA helped us develop evaluation surveys that we have been using after all of our offerings. The responses to our post-training surveys have been very positive, with virtually all participants agreeing that as a result they understand more about the needs of interfaith families and learned new ways to be welcoming. One teacher said,

“Ari really did a great job communicating on a level we could understand and was helpful on how to address the issues of interfaith families.”

One principal said,

“The seminar was excellent. The information was relevant and the ideas presented can be put into use immediately.”

One rabbi said,

“I feel more up-to-date about intermarriage and synagogue policies; it was a deeper conversation than I expected; it was excellent to be with rabbis from all movements.”

We were gratified to hear this from Rabbi Lizzi Heydemann:

“I will say that Ari's presence and the presence of an organization with this approach in the city has really affected the way I talk and write about interfaith Jews in our community and beyond.”

The [CFJE](#) has asked us to offer two sessions at its major teacher in-service training in August, and we hope to include the [Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs](#) in that program. We have lined up two other trainings for the second year, including one sponsored by the [BJE](#) for religious school teachers.

#### **4. Workshops for New Couples**

We offered the hybrid online/in-person *Love and Religion* workshop in February with four couples participating and again in May with eight couples. We experimented and found that having the in-person session first, followed by the three videoconferencing sessions, and having the workshop co-facilitated by an experienced social worker, Rosalie Greenberger from the JC&FS, worked best.

The responses to our post-workshop surveys were very positive. Most participants said that as a result of the workshop they felt empowered to talk about interfaith issues with their partners, and that they gained an understanding of how Judaism can fit into their interfaith relationships. One participant said,

“I really enjoyed the workshop. I think that it is going to be a lifelong journey of learning and I'm looking forward to taking additional workshops in the future.”

#### **5. Learning How and Why to Live Jewishly**

A major accomplishment of the first year was the development of our first hybrid online/in-person class, *Raising a Child with Judaism in Your Interfaith Family*. We were greatly assisted in the process by our online learning consultant, Karen Reiss Medwed from Boston's Hebrew College. The class includes eight sessions learned online with background reading, audio and video files, and personal journal entries and discussion board posts commented on by the facilitator. The class also had two in-person meetings, a Shabbat experience and a wrap-up session. Each session was designed to teach a Jewish practice that responds to a universal parenting need and value (having a calm and reflective bedtime, appreciation for food and concern for hunger, making a regular time to be grateful, ethical behavior, etc.).

The responses to post-class surveys were very positive. Almost all said that as a result of the class they felt more knowledgeable about Judaism and Jewish practice and gained more of an understanding of how Judaism can fit into their interfaith family. Ten respondents said their practices had changes as a result of the class to include saying the bedtime Shema, Ha'Motzi, and/or Shabbat blessings; one respondent said they visited two synagogues “because of involvement in the class.” One person said,

“I was so glad to get to ask some of the burning questions I had had and to get some great answers. I was impressed how open Ari Moffic was about taking on all kinds of questions and answering them in a way that was warm and genuine and not defensive.”

We are close to completing the second online class that we will be offering in the second year, *Preparing for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah in Your Interfaith Family*.

### **Summary By the Numbers:**

- Over 60 meetings, 9 adult ed and program sessions, regular blog posts and tweets, 36,559 site visits from Chicago, 3,200 visits to the new [Chicagoland Community Page](#), 15 more clergy on our officiation referral list, and increased listings on our Network of 46 more organizations, 56 more professionals, and 154 more non-professional individuals;
- 103 responses to officiation requests, 24 follow-up conversations and 5 in-person meetings; 2 follow-up resources created for clergy;
- 7 trainings for 80 participants;
- 2 workshops for 12 couples;
- 1 class for 21 couples.

### **Lessons Learned and Looking Ahead**

We are especially pleased with the results of our relationship building efforts: a positive relationship with the [Chicago Federation](#); inroads with the Conservative movement, in particular with our Advisory Council member Rabbi Michael Seigel and his congregation, [Anshe Emet](#), but also with the [Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs](#); and a recent agreement to co-sponsor with [Reform Jewish Chicago](#) a [High Holiday program for young families](#).

Although we are on track to meet our goals, recruiting professionals to join our Network and participate in trainings, and recruiting end users to join the Network, subscribe to the email newsletter, submit officiation requests, and participate in workshops and classes, is an ongoing challenge. We need to continue to focus on our efforts to build awareness of our offerings. We also want to stimulate more activity on the groups we have created on our Network to keep training, workshop, and class participants in touch with each other.

Young couples are particularly challenged for time; they tell us they want more in-person gatherings, including Shabbat dinners, because they want to socialize and “do Jewish” with other interfaith couples, but attendance at our in-person class sessions was low. We may need to offer more sessions in more locations to overcome logistic obstacles.

We are working in a very nuanced area. We still encounter professionals who are not friendly to efforts to attract interfaith families and, while most professionals do want to attract people in interfaith relationships, some feel they are already sufficiently welcoming and some are conflicted in their responses. We encounter a wide range of needs and interest from end users as well: some couples are clearly on a Jewish path, some want to “do both,” and many are undecided. It is an ongoing challenge to create cohesive groups with such a wide range of perspectives.

We regularly identify opportunities to modify and expand our program – more attention to the parents of intermarrying young adults; a Sunday school and a Shabbat morning family

worship for unaffiliated interfaith couples; more help for synagogues in attracting interfaith families.

We need to build local support for IFF/Chicago, including financial support from individuals. We have an Advisory Council of eight prominent Chicago rabbis and community leaders that we are working to expand. We started IFF/Chicago with one full-time director position and soon realized that the work was much more than one person could handle; with increased support from the Crown Family Philanthropies, we recently added a half-time support person for Rabbi Moffic, and could easily productively use a full-time second person. With the half-time additional staff, the budget for the second year of the project, which is covered by our generous foundation support, is \$205,000.

We are confident that our program is meeting its important goals. The responses to our trainings, workshops, and classes show that professionals are more aware of and sensitive to the needs of interfaith families; that couples are finding clergy to officiate at their life-cycle events and through our workshop are learning how to talk with each other and make decisions about religious traditions for their family; and that parents with young children are learning about Judaism and Jewish practices and starting to try them out. We are also confident that with sufficient support going forward we can continue to develop and refine our offerings, increase awareness and recruit more participants to them, and build local support for an ongoing effort.

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As of July 2012 we are likely to have funding to launch InterfaithFamily/San Francisco and InterfaithFamily/Philadelphia in 2012. We are actively talking with other communities and have an ambitious plan to be in eleven communities in five years. We would be pleased to provide additional information about the InterfaithFamily/Your Community model and how it could be brought to your community.