Change at the Top

InterfaithFamily.com marked a major transition in September. After five years of leadership, the founding Chair of our Board of Directors, Esta Epstein, stepped down as Board Chair. Fortunately, Esta is remaining on the Board—and in fact taking on new responsibilities as chair of our new Governance Committee—and we have a wonderful replacement!

Our new Board Chair, Ginny Wise, is a development professional at Harvard and a member of the Board of Directors of Combined Jewish Philanthropies, the Boston federation. Her family is very active in the Jewish community, especially at Hillel, where her mother is a Vice Chair of the Board.

At a dinner for the Board at Ginny’s home, Barry Shrage, CJP’s president, honored Esta for her wise guidance and passionate commitment to Jewish outreach to interfaith families. Barry said, “Thanks in part to your efforts, the Boston Jewish community is seeing more Jewish involvement by interfaith couples and families than anywhere in the country.”

In 2006 we added three new Board members. In the last issue of The Connection we announced Kristin Hendler, from Boston, MA, a Harvard MBA working at Bain Consulting, and Steve Kris, from Denver, CO, a private investor who also serves on the boards of Stepping Stones to a Jewish Me and Denver’s Jewish Family Service. In October, Mamie Kanfer, from Minneapolis, MN, became the newest member of our Board. Mamie, who works for the Lippman Kanfer Family Foundation, is actively involved in next generation Jewish philanthropy and committed to building a Jewish community that welcomes interfaith couples.

Building a national board maximizes our ability to carry out our mission: to empower interfaith families to make Jewish choices and encourage the Jewish community to welcome them.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Change at the Top
Advocating for Inclusive Attitudes, Policies and Practice
Educating and Connecting Interfaith Families to the Jewish Community
First Ever Conference of Our Professionals Advisory Circle
Transforming Our Work
Advocating
for Inclusive Attitudes, Policies and Practices

The InterfaithFamily.com Network is the leading grassroots advocate for a Jewish community that is welcoming and inclusive of interfaith families. We’ve been very busy speaking and lobbying on behalf of outreach in the past months, and have two major developments to report.

The first has to do with rabbinic officiation at intermarriages. We have long viewed couples’ encounters with rabbis asking them to officiate at their intermarriage as a critical point at which many couples are lost to the Jewish community. In June, at the annual convention of the CCAR, the Reform rabbis’ association, we hosted a reception and information session to discuss an initiative to help rabbis address the officiation question. We announced formation of a new Rabbinic Circle with a new section of our website with information of particular interest to rabbis on the issue.

The second has to do with major new evidence that outreach works. In November the Boston federation, CJP, released the 2005 Jewish community survey, which found that 60% of interfaith families in the Greater Boston area are raising their children as Jews, far more than the national rate of 33%. In contrast to the national and other local Jewish communities, which spend less than one tenth of one percent of their annual funding on outreach to interfaith families, CJP spends ten times more—a full 1%. We will advocate throughout the country: look what 1% can do. Every community can see the dramatic results that Boston has seen.

Our ongoing advocacy efforts included a stint as Rosner’s Guest on Haaretz.com in July. In September we launched the IFF Network Blog—visit www.interfaithfamily.com/networkblog. In response to an AP religion writer’s article about new efforts to encourage conversion, we had a number of letters to the editor published, including this one in the Washington Times:

Encouraging more interfaith couples to raise their children as Jews is critically important to ensuring Jewish continuity. [Reform leader] Rabbi Yoffie’s balanced approach recognizes that that will happen far more often if the non-Jewish partner is genuinely welcomed and accepted than if conversion is promoted too aggressively.

Educating
and Connecting Interfaith Families to the Jewish Community

InterfaithFamily.com continues to offer an unparalleled resource for interfaith families exploring Jewish life. Our Archive now contains more than 1,500 articles. Our Web Magazine continues to address new topics, including Hindu-Jewish relationships and this year’s overlapping of the Jewish High Holidays and Ramadan. We recently created another downloadable resource, Guide to Birth Ceremonies for Interfaith Families, based on submissions from 30 couples and rabbis. In August we launched our first blog, Peace Within These Walls, and also made it easy to print entire issues of the Web Magazine.

Be sure to check out our Resource Pages, organized by topic, that include ceremony ideas, recommended articles, links to our article Archive, recommended books and websites and helpful articles from MyJewishLearning.com. Visit www.interfaithfamily.com/resources for the full list of available Resource Pages.

In September the URJ Press published Inside Intermarriage, a book by Jim Keen based in part on articles he has written for our Web Magazine over the years. We were pleased to write a cover endorsement of the book, to put an audio interview of Jim on our website, and to arrange a purchase discount for our readers.

Our Connections In Your Area system allows site visitors to take a “next step” toward welcoming organizations and events in their local Jewish communities. We now have more than 350 organizations listed in over 100 communities—and they continue to report that newcomers say they found them on Connections In Your Area.

We created a new model Community Page for the Greater Boston area that allows users to learn, in one place, about all of the welcoming organizations where they live. Check out www.interfaithfamily.com/boston. We’d be glad to list your organization, or talk with you about creating a community page for your community—email us at connections@interfaithfamily.com.
Building Community
First Ever Conference of Our Professionals Advisory Circle

The InterfaithFamily.com Network Professionals Advisory Circle builds community among professionals whose jobs include conducting outreach programs for interfaith couples and families. The PAC has operated by a listserv and quarterly telephone conference calls, with the most recent featuring a presentation by demographer Ariela Keysar.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, the Professionals Advisory Circle will hold its first ever in-person conference, May 8-10 at the Capital Camps Retreat in Waynesboro, PA.

To see a list of Circle members, go to www.interfaithfamily.com/PAC; if you’re interested in joining, email us at connections@interfaithfamily.com.

From Our Readers

“I truly appreciate your email and the open arms it shows of the Jewish community to our family.”
   Teresa, September 25

“Your blog is like a special JTA daily update for the intermarried! I’m so excited you are doing this!”
   Julie, September 19

“I am so pleased that I discovered your website. It makes me feel not alone.”
   Janet, August 21

“We’re grateful to have such a resource. We’ll be using it a lot!”
   Emily, August 18

“Wow, I just sort of stumbled upon this site and never realized that there is such a network of support out here.”
   Miller, July 30

“It’s very reassuring to see that there are resources that can help me through these struggles planning our interfaith wedding.”
   Eric, July 21

In October we published a special issue of our Web Magazine on outreach success stories. Edmund Case was highlighted in an article about conversion in Hadassah Magazine. In response to a statement by Binyamin Netanyahu that equated intermarriage and assimilation, we had this letter to the editor published in the Jerusalem Post:

Many intermarried families in North America are not assimilated, they are actively participating and engaging in Jewish life and enriching the Jewish community. But intermarried families will not willingly enter the Jewish community if they hear intermarriage disparaged as a negative loss by leaders like Netanyahu.

In November, our third annual December Holidays survey was a huge success, attracting 759 responses, almost double the previous year. Preliminary indications are that the survey will again confirm that participating in Christmas celebrations does not negatively impact the Jewish identity of children being raised Jewish by intermarried parents.

We exhibited in November at the United Jewish Communities General Assembly in Los Angeles, and have been invited to Los Angeles again in January to speak at the RAVSAK conference for community day schools.

As always, we welcome your input—please email your thoughts or suggestions to us at network@interfaithfamily.com.
Transforming Our Work

In September, InterfaithFamily.com was named, for the second year in a row, in the Slingshot listing of 50 innovative Jewish organizations published by 21/64, part of the Andrea & Charles Bronfman Philanthropies.

Innovation requires constant adaptation, and we are always evaluating how we can best serve the needs of interfaith couples and families exploring Jewish life. In August we developed a new Transformation Plan, which calls for the creation of a national association of outreach program providers as an outgrowth of our Professionals Advisory Circle; a stepped-up initiative to address rabbinic officiation at intermarriages; a new social networking effort to connect interfaith couples and families with each other; and a new website section for young adult children of intermarried parents.

Our ambitious transformation plans require increased funding, and we are extremely pleased and grateful to have begun to receive significant funding from major philanthropists. In addition to grants in 2006 from the Samuel Bronfman Foundation and the Children of Harvey and Lyn Meyerhoff Philanthropic Fund, we received a new grant from the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation and renewed funding from the Richard & Rhoda Goldman Fund.

We enjoy a diverse funding base. Of our $539,500 in funding received in 2006, 55% came from foundations, 26% from Board members, 13% from major gifts (> $500) from other individuals, and 2% from other contributions.

If you would like more information about our Transformation Plan, please contact Edmund Case at 617-581-6805 or edc@interfaithfamily.com.