

How Thinking About Legacy Transformed the Jewish Community in Greater Mercer

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Members of the Greater Mercer, New Jersey, Jewish community participate in the "Create a Jewish Legacy" national conference in Springfield, Mass., hosted by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation.

Photo credit: Jewish Community Foundation of Greater Mercer/Harold Grinspoon Foundation.

By Julie Meyers and Scott Schaefer

The Jewish community in the Greater Mercer area in New Jersey is thriving thanks to a new perspective and a program that helped us pull together after a difficult time.

About four years ago, our small Jewish community, halfway between New York and Philadelphia, found itself in an uncertain and uneasy time when a community campus failed to open. It was then we embarked on a new partnership with the Harold Grinspoon Foundation (HGF) that we hoped would provide our community an opportunity to not only heal but to thrive.

LIFE & LEGACY has done that and more.

Through LIFE & LEGACY™, our foundation started a community-wide legacy giving program, creating a shared goal for organizations within the Greater Mercer area to work toward. In collaboration with HGF, we in turn, partnered with local synagogues and Jewish organizations in a multi-year program that allowed us to provide coaching, training and incentive grants to ensure that legacy giving becomes integrated into the philanthropic culture of our community.

As a participant in LIFE & LEGACY, our foundation received a grant from HGF with matching funds enabling us to encourage and collaborate with local partners to meet legacy commitment benchmarks.

Our local partners include Adath Israel Congregation, Beth El Synagogue, Congregation Beth Chaim, Congregation Toras Emes, Greenwood House, The Jewish Center, Jewish Family & Children's Service, Kehilat HaNahar, National Museum of American Jewish History, Or Chadash, Rimon: The Mordecai T. Mezrich Center for Jewish Learning, Shalom Heritage Center, and Temple Beth-El.

By bringing together these organizations from across the Greater Mercer area, we've opened new doors of possibility and collaboration. Through LIFE & LEGACY alone, we secured more than 520 legacy commitments, valued at more than \$30 million.

Organizations have also now integrated legacy giving into their culture, providing donors with the opportunity to make after-lifetime financial commitments that will ensure our community remains strong and vibrant for many years to come.

But more than that, we've found a new sense of community. LIFE & LEGACY opened the door to allow our community to dream bigger than we ever have before. The program has given us a space to collaborate and has helped leaders from each partner organization to build relationships with each other and more importantly, with members of our community who might previously have felt disengaged or disconnected.

Arlene Schiff, the national director of the LIFE & LEGACY program, regularly reminds us of how far we've come. In our first meeting with her and the partner organizations, it was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Nobody stayed behind after the meeting ended to socialize, because nobody knew each other. We were too siloed. Now, four years later, it seems like meetings don't end as people gather to socialize long after the business talk is finished.

Over the past four years, we've also built bridges to the Greater Mercer community outside of our Jewish institutions. And at Or Chadash, a cantor who calls herself a "Jew-by-choice" sought to give back to the community and made a legacy promise, telling the congregation, "you're my family."

LIFE & LEGACY was the right program at the right time to help strengthen our community when we needed it most – and we continue to give thanks for all that it has given us.

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