

## Visions of Diversity: A Glimpse into the World of the JCC

### By Patricia Cipora Harte

Firmly rooted in pluralism and non-denominationalism, JCCs are places where diversity flourishes. Diversity takes many forms within JCCs throughout North America, encompassing who is served, what is offered, and the overall mission of each JCC. JCCs serve all age groups from pre-natal to frail elderly, and a wide array of population and interest groups as well. The programs that are offered include all the program areas of the JCC: Jewish education, Jewish living and learning, sports, health, recreation, arts, camping, and early childhood. Each JCC has its own mission statement, and many of them include a declaration about being welcoming to the entire breadth of the Jewish community. This commitment to openness and access allows for many different people to find a "home" at the JCC.

In the past few weeks I have had the opportunity to talk with Jewish educators who work in JCCs and glean from them how they define and understand diversity. These are some examples of what I have heard:

- JCC board members reflect the three major religious denominations and secular Jewry, as well
- outreach to intermarried families, people with special needs, and gays and lesbians is more and more on the radar screen of programmers
- sensitivity to how language is used is increasing, i.e., applications that ask for the name of an adult in the household rather than mother or father

When a JCC serves families, it serves a range of family constellations that may include single-parent families, same-sex or different-sex parent families, blended families, as well as the traditional model of a married couple and their biological children. Knowing and understanding the range of definition of "family" enables the JCC to be welcoming and responsive to the diversity within its community. In the "family" section of most JCCs' program guides one can easily find program offerings for fathers with sons, fathers with daughters, mothers and daughters, single-parent families, and gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender families. The language that is used in forms, applications, and marketing materials can be sensitive to these variations; instead of asking for the name of mother or father, for instance, ask for head of household, adult, or simply name. Many JCCs are also seriously involved in providing services and programs to those with special needs and integrating them into existing programs, rather than segmenting them out.

Reaching out to the under-engaged is of great interest to JCCs. Some JCCs have staff dedicated to working with interfaith couples and families and integrating them into the overall programming of the JCC. Such staff is more likely to understand that someone might experience seeing Hebrew signs everywhere as distancing, and will consider how to present such signs in a more welcoming context. There are JCCs that have staff who are developing and running programs for interfaith couples and families to help them learn about and feel more comfortable with Judaism. There is a "Stepping Stones" program that some JCCs are using to provide programming for interfaith families.

Since JCCs have many age groups within the same building at the same time, there are innumerable opportunities for bringing together different groups for the express purpose of sharing and learning together. This includes integrating children from the early childhood programs with the older adults who participate in programs, lectures and other activities. Another example is for teens to do community service working with

programs, lectures and other activities. Another example is for teens to do community service working with either older adults and/or younger children, in the pre-school or after school programs.

Diversity in programming is yet another way to think about this issue within the realm of the JCC. One of the goals for many JCCs has been to incorporate Jewish ideas and Jewish values into all aspects of the agency.

An expression in one JCC is "Jewish everyday, everywhere." This is a clear message of thinking, acting, and being Jewish in all program areas, in all areas of administration, in all areas of staffing, and in the physical space of the JCC. Given the range of patterns of observance and behavior within Judaism, it is important for all to feel welcomed in the JCC. An example of this can be seen in the pool. There are groups who are committed to men and women swimming separately and not in view of each other. Responsive JCCs have separate swim hours to accommodate this observance. They may have curtains and blinds to cover viewing windows to the pool.

Another interpretation of diversity refers to different learning styles, and JCCs offer appropriate programs and opportunities that allow for the variety of learning modalities. By this I am referring to learners who learn best via one of the following: auditory, visual, or kinesthetic methods. Each of us has a more preferred learning style and it is necessary to take this into account when programming to assure that there are different types of classes offered to attract the range of learners. In addition, it is helpful for teachers and facilitators to incorporate various methods of learning to assure the most positive experiences. Lectures appeal to the auditory learner, but if a lecture is accompanied by handouts, a Powerpoint presentation, or other visual tool, it will be helpful for the visual learner. A pottery or painting class, which focuses on the kinesthetic learning style, would also appeal to those with a visual preference, if there are examples to look at and slides of paintings and pots.

Diversity in the JCC spans, all ages, identification, program, staffing, administration, It is a hallmark of the JCC as a central address for Jewish life within individual communities,

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