

The Transformation of the Kings Bay Y

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In his major address ten years ago, John Ruskay eloquently stated, “The Federation neither owns the community nor manages the community...What Federation must do, in addition to providing the essential infrastructure... is to provide essential resources for fulfilling our historic responsibilities and community building” (see the Appendix). These words have found a very practical application in the process of revitalizing the Kings Bay Y in the past three years.

Kings Bay Y is a Jewish Community Center serving the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Sheepshead Bay, South Midwood, Homecrest, Marine Park, Bergen Beach, and Mill Basin. This catchment area is one of the most densely Jewish zip codes in the country.

I became its executive director in December 2006 when the agency, which had a long history of serving the community, was on the verge of extinction. For the past six years, it had been running at a deficit that had wiped out almost \$1 million from its endowment fund. By March 2007, the agency could no longer meet its payroll obligations. The Y’s programming was stagnant, failing to take into account the major demographic changes that had taken place in the catchment area in the past 15 years. The programs were geared toward only one segment of the community: native-born senior citizens. The staff exhibited low morale. The facility itself had fallen into disrepair, and its swimming pool and locker rooms had not been renovated for many years. The Y lacked creativity, energy, passion and proactive thinking.

We had to develop a new strategic vision that focused on serving the different Jewish subcommunities in our area: secular American Jews, Russian Jewish immigrants, and young Orthodox families. We defined our mission as concentrating our efforts on the growth, not just mere survival, of the Jewish community and on strengthening our connection with Israel and Jewish peoplehood. We believed that our community center could serve as a laboratory of Jewish integration, creating meaningful programs that could offer our children a sense of their Jewish identity and of belonging to the Jewish people and could help them form a lasting connection to Israel.

Significant demographic shifts in the past seven to eight years in Brooklyn had occurred, as thousands of young Russian Jews and their children had moved into the Greater Sheepshead Bay/Bergen/Mill Basin community. These unaffiliated Jews were embarking on the long journey from the process of resettlement and acculturation to the process of integration and involvement. We saw the Y’s communal responsibility as serving as the anchor institution for many of their needs and as their entry portal into the Jewish community, not only as mere observers of Jewish life but also as active participants.

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When we faced the Y's many crises, it was obvious to us that we did not have the luxury of implementing a gradual change. The choice we faced was very stark: to close the agency down, leaving thousands of young Jewish families and individuals with no place to grow and develop Jewishly, or to institute immediate and major changes. We understood that we could only succeed by simultaneously creating new programs, reaching out to the community, fixing our physical space, and developing a new board of directors.

UJA-Federation was there to guide us in the development of both our short-term plans and our long-term vision. Most importantly, UJA-Federation believed in us and in the need to retain the Y as a critical institution serving thousands of Jews. It extended a \$250,000 loan to save us from bankruptcy, and its talented staff worked tirelessly to provide us with pro bono management assistance, strategic planning, and capacity-building services. UJA-Federation was instrumental in reviving our board of directors, which replaced our previous board that disbanded in March 2007. We were able to make substantial capital improvements using public funds and the bridge loan from UJA-Federation.

Under the leadership of our new dedicated staff we created numerous programs for the community while reaching out to different segments of our community. Guided by our new Board of Directors led by Stephen Reiner, whose dedication to the Jewish community is truly inspiring, we made substantial capital improvements using public funds and the bridge loan from UJA-Federation. When young professionals from the Russian American Jewish community ask me why they should be involved in the Jewish community through UJA-Federation, I always point out our own example. I tell them that the Museum of Natural History or other fine institutions in the city can always count on a strong donor base, because they are well known, prestigious, and are able to attract the rich and the famous. But what would a Jewish Community Center in Sheepshead Bay do if it falls on hard times and it has no illustrious donor base or large endowment funds? This is when we benefit from UJA-Federation as the convener and the safety net for our community in guiding those who need its critical assistance in the process of community building. This happens because UJA truly adheres to the concept of *kol Yisrael areivim ze bezeh*, of all Jews being responsible for one another.

Today, we have eliminated our budget deficit, and we are blessed to have a new and diverse board comprised of young professionals, veteran lay people, Russians, and native-born Americans, both Brooklyn- and Manhattan-based. Our five young Russian-born board members, who understand the financial and fiduciary responsibility of their board involvement, are a source of special inspiration for me. Although the Jewish community has a long way to go in attracting more of this new leadership talent and building a cohesive and inclusive New York Jewish community, the new board is a welcome sign that the vision laid out by John Ruskay in 1999 can and will be fulfilled.

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