



(Left to Right) Leora Rozin, Michael Wolkoff, Debbie Goldberg

40 Years of Quiet Commitment to Community

A Rational Mind, A Generous Heart

When Michael Wolkoff arrived in Rochester 40 years ago, he was looking to live in a city with a Jewish community—but his priority was building a career. A Division I tennis player at Columbia, a PhD from the University of Michigan, and eventually an economics professor at the University of Rochester, Michael approached life with the same analytical rigor he brought to the classroom.

But something else guided him too: a deep, quiet sense of Jewish identity.

"I grew up celebrating Rosh Hashanah for two days," he recalls. "I was always broad in my Jewish approach—open to different traditions, different ways of connecting."

That openness led him to the Jewish Federation of Greater Rochester, where he's been a loyal donor for four decades.

Why Federation?

For Michael, the Federation's role as an umbrella organization made sense from the start.

"Federation helped figure out what the community's needs are," he explains. "I wanted to give broadly and trust that the money goes where it was needed most."

As an economist, Michael appreciates systems that work efficiently—and he sees Federation as exactly that.

"You're an umbrella organization that funds Jewish needs and provides Jewish programming," he says. "That model works."

From Donor to Engaged Community Member

For the first 20 years, Michael's involvement was simple: he wrote a check. But over the past decade, something shifted.

"I started going to events—Silver Circle, the DAF gathering, guest lectures," he says. "As an academic, I love learning. And I love that Federation brings people together. Everyone's in their own silos otherwise."

It's not just the programming that draws him in—it's the people. Events like Zikaron BaSalon, where generations come together to share stories and memory, have left a lasting impression. "Interacting with younger generations—that matters to me," he reflects. "I appreciated seeing the young leadership step up."

A Strategic Approach to Giving

Michael opened a [Donor-Advised Fund \(DAF\)](#) with the Federation when tax laws changed—and he's glad he did.

"It's very easy to make contributions," he says. "And what really swung me was knowing that the administrative fees stay with Federation. The money goes to the [Annual Campaign](#). I felt like I was helping the community just by keeping my dollars here."

He's also comforted by the legacy flexibility a DAF offers.

"If there's money left, it can go to my beneficiaries—or stay with the Federation. Or some combination of the two."

Doing the Right Thing

Michael appreciates receiving a handwritten thank-you note or an invitation to a small gathering, but what is important is contributing to the Jewish community.

He says simply. "I just want to do the right thing. I'm a rational thinker. But I'm also a philanthropist. I want to make people happy."

When asked what he'd tell others considering a gift or a DAF, his answer is straightforward:

"The experience was nice. It wasn't heavy-handed. Someone was there, reaching out, helping me realize my goals. That meant a lot."