

Jewish Community Relations Council

Stronger Together

By Daniel Pearlman

I am so lucky to call Toledo my new home.

Since moving here just a few weeks ago, I have felt the warmth of the community in every conversation I've had as I begin my role as the Federation's Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council. I bring to this role a background in relationship building, Israel advocacy, and nonprofit management.

At the end of my first week, I attended a virtual training by the Western States Center based on their newly revised toolkit for educators and community leaders called "Confronting White Nationalism." The organization's director, Eric K. Ward, is a strong ally of the Jewish community, works closely with the Anti-Defamation League and others, and speaks eloquently about white nationalism with personal experience both from infiltrating such groups as a researcher and, as a Black man, from being targeted by the hate that these groups espouse. Eric's takeaway is this: "Antisemitism isn't at the core of white nationalism; it is the core of white nationalism."

Moving to Toledo last month from Pittsburgh, I understand this closely. Just over two years ago, a far-right gunman walked into the Tree of Life synagogue in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood and massacred eleven Jews in prayer in what amounted to the deadliest antisemitic attack in Amer-

ican history. Exactly six months later, another gunman walked into the Chabad house in Poway, California, resulting in another senseless murder. These instances, though extreme, serve as a stark reminder of the need for community relations. Rising hate and extremism make building strong relationships and coalitions with diverse groups more important than ever. But there is more to being Jewish than fighting antisemitism. To paraphrase outgoing JCRC Director Fagie Benstein, we as Jews should focus not just on the "oy" of being Jewish, but on the "joy" as well. After the Tree of Life massacre, friends and allies from many Christian denominations, the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh, the Pittsburgh Sikh Gurdwara, and so many others sprang into action, raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for the victims and their families and attending Shabbat services to stand in solidarity with the Jewish community when we were most vulnerable. I understand that here in Toledo, hundreds of people from diverse communities across the city attended the vigil that took place at Temple Shomer Emunim. These relationships did not begin on October 27, 2018. They are years in the making, involving dedication and willingness from every community to put our differences aside and focus on our similarities. With time, these relationships make our communities stronger together.

The moral of the story isn't the incredible number of dollars raised, or even the strength of community partnerships and desire to stand

with those who need it most, but the heartwarming endorsement that these efforts had from the ground up. We need the community's support in our efforts to build a safer and more robust Jewish community and a better society for all. As the new Jewish Community Relations Council Director at the Federation and a proud new member of the Toledo Jewish community, I hope that I can help build upon the amazing success that Fagie and the JCRC has worked tirelessly to achieve. To quote Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel when reflecting on the march from Selma to Montgomery with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, "I prayed with my feet." Will you?

If I can ask you, the reader, to start with just one action in this effort, it is to reach out to a neighbor or someone of a different political persuasion to get to know them, try to understand their perspective, and most of all, focus on how much you have in common – and how your differences can add value to the world. Once you do this, you'll realize how much learning about others can teach you about yourself. As Americans and as Jews, we can be unified without being uniform.

Thank you to Fagie Benstein; to our chair, Sue Ann Hochberg; to our committee members, Tom Kasle, Rich Rusgo, and Dena Zack; and to our executive director, Stephen Rothschild. I look forward to the critical work ahead.