



The members of Roots & Branches Foundation 2013-14

Jewish Values at Work in Our Community

by Masen Uliss, Roots & Branches Foundation Member

Participating in Roots & Branches is such an enjoyable and richly rewarding experience because the program calls upon each member of the group to navigate together through a highly personal, complex decision-making process. Each step of our journey involved a great deal of learning.

To begin, we needed to understand the philanthropic world in general, its landscape in Denver and the grantmaking process itself. Past this, the slate was blank – we generated a working list of community issues that fit our values and concerns, and then studied these areas so we could make educated decisions about grant priority areas and develop our Request for Proposals. Then, we learned as much as we could about the organizations that submitted applications. This learning was only part of the picture, as each step spurred more personal introspection. However, we were not simply learning about ourselves independently. Reaching consensus among the group of 18 and establishing common ground for action involved patient, careful, but direct communication.

The two grant priorities we chose reflect the fruits of this process. The first of these priorities sought to bring health and dignity to the youngest and oldest members of the local community by providing nutritious food. Inspired by the Jewish principle of *lo ta'amod al dam rei'echa* (not standing idly by in the face of injustice) we funded organizations to support areas that lack access to affordable, good quality food. Our second grant priority focused on strengthening training and education for those in middle-skill jobs – specifically for under- or unemployed adults with dependents. We hoped to enable

Continued on Page 4

**Roots & Branches Foundation
made 4 grants totaling**

\$74,000
in 2013-14.

On Doing Good

by Emily Schulman, Roots & Branches Foundation Member



Emily Schulman with Eric Kornacki, Executive Director of Revision International, at the Roots & Branches Foundation final celebration

I recently had a conversation with a few friends about what it means to “leave a mark on the world.” One friend asserted that making others happy is sufficient. She feels that so few people actually end up significantly changing the world, so the rest of us should focus on spreading joy. Another friend disagreed. She believes that while making others happy is a worthy pursuit, it’s not enough. She feels a call to do something greater and to make a contribution to the community around her.

Viscerally, I also feel a responsibility to positively contribute to the world around me. I have led a life of privilege – a liberal arts education, extensive travel abroad, a constant sense of comfort and security – that brings with it a duty to give back. But this obligation to “do good” can be both vague and overwhelming. What does it mean to do good? Where do you start? At what point is the responsibility fulfilled? Is it ever fulfilled? Would you want it to be?

Roots & Branches provides a space in which to examine these questions. While eight months may not be long enough to arrive at comprehensive answers, it is enough time to develop a set of tools to help us refine our answers over a lifetime.

Spreading joy and doing good are both worthwhile in their own right. But it is not enough to settle for an unclear feeling of the obligation to do good. Part of doing good is approaching the concept with intention, endless questioning, and the understanding that doing good is not a finite endeavor that can be compared to the good done by those around us. Doing good is a process in which we must be active participants all our lives. While this process will likely look different for each of us as we move on from Roots & Branches, I imagine there will be common themes: we will look for ways to become more involved in our communities, be more thoughtful about the role we play with our time and money, have a greater awareness of and appreciation for the work being done throughout Denver and, every once in awhile, we’ll come together to check in about how it’s going.

Collaboration Through Diversity

by Johnathan Sar, Roots & Branches Foundation Member

After a trip to the “pub,” where at any moment a drunken brawl could break out, the “outdoor café,” where a car with a shattered windshield was parked askew, and the “command center,” which resembled the set of the television show “24,” we met the stars of our site visit to the Community College of Aurora’s Center for Simulation. Before us, on a row of stretchers, lay a family of “high fidelity” mannequins that can mimic health scenarios from heart attacks to childbirth. The mannequins – along with the Center’s professionally designed “sets” – are used to teach healthcare skills to students, including participants in the College’s new Healthcare Bridge Program, an eventual 2014 Roots & Branches Foundation grantee. Despite the unique setting of this site visit, the excitement and sense of discovery I felt embodied my Roots & Branches experience.

As a complement to the tangible satisfaction of our site visits, Roots & Branches provided an ideal setting for intellectual growth and self-reflection. I was part of a diverse group of 18 Jewish young professionals. We were Denver natives and

recent transplants; we worked in corporate and nonprofit settings; our Jewish backgrounds and levels of religious observance spanned the spectrum. Through Roots & Branches, including its emphasis on consensus decision making, our group was able to identify shared values, refine grantmaking priorities and work together to achieve our philanthropic goals. Each participant brought his or her unique perspective to the table, and I enjoyed finding my voice in the spirited exchange of ideas that took place during our time together.

I believe our grantees reflect the unique ability of Roots & Branches to take motivated people and help them define and reach a common goal. The work of each of our grantees deeply embodies the Jewish value of *v’hechezekta bo* (supporting those who need help in becoming self-sufficient), a principle that resonated with many of us early on in the program. Our grantees also reflect our group’s shared desire to fund innovative solutions to difficult problems. Finally, they represent the fruits of a challenging, engaging process of which I am proud to have been a part.



Johnathan Sar with fellow member, Karen Shapiro, during a team building exercise

Roots & Branches Foundation 2013-14 Members

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Amy Engelman
Rachael Gurian
Igor Kagan
Karen Niebrugge
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Continued from Page 1

those in need to become self-sufficient but also to extend their current economic ability and help them to create a more hopeful future for their families. In both of these areas, we were also guided by a teaching from *Pirke Avot* (The Ethics of Our Fathers), "Let other people's dignity be as precious to you as your own."

The roots of each of these priorities reach deeply into our shared Jewish values, especially the Jewish ideals of *v'hechezekta bo* (supporting those who need help in becoming self-sufficient) and *kavod habriot* (upholding the dignity of others). We are also confident that our grantees' positive work will help to extend the reach of these values. We all leave grateful to have been a part of this inspiring program that each year transforms yet another corner of the Denver Jewish community. We are eager to build on the community that we created amongst ourselves, and return to the broader community renewed and looking through fresh eyes for other ways to contribute.



Masen Uliss at the opening retreat.

Roots & Branches Foundation 2013-14 Grants

SUPPORTING ACCESS TO NUTRITIOUS FOOD

Denver Urban Gardens (Denver): \$10,000 for the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program at DeLaney Community Farm, which provides free vegetable shares as well as training in gardening and healthy food preparation for low-income families.

Revision International (Denver): \$25,000 for Re:Farm, a program to increase access to healthy, local and organic food for low-income families by empowering residents to grow food in their own backyards. The program provides training, garden supplies and year-round support.

SUPPORTING MIDDLE SKILL JOB TRAINING AND PLACEMENT

Community College of Aurora (Denver): \$25,000 for the Healthcare Bridge Certificate Program to provide non-native English speaking students with advanced language development and health care skills and certifications. Upon completion of the program, students are prepared to enter a health-related career path.

Work Options for Women (Denver): \$14,000 for the Advanced Culinary and Supervisory Skills Training Program, which provides paid and supervised, on-the-job training in culinary supervision and management skills. Students completing the program enter the job market at a higher wage and progress more quickly up the food services career ladder.