



Shaping Our Jewish Future

Report to the Community 2012

A Grantmaking Initiative of Rose Community Foundation



The members
of Roots &
Branches
Foundation
2011-12

Engagement in Jewish Life: Paying it Forward

by Marisa Ellman, Roots & Branches Foundation member

What does it mean to a group of 18 young Jewish adults to make grants to nonprofit organizations in a *primarily Jewish way* as strategic philanthropists?

Our Roots & Branches group spent the past nine months answering this question. We wrestled with many possible grantmaking priorities from diverse fields: everything from assisting veterans to refugees to youth-at-risk emerged in the early phases of decision making. Ultimately, we decided to fund programs that will help more Jewish people find meaning and relevance in Jewish life and connect to Jewish communities. The more we learned about the lack of engagement among Jews in our community, the more we realized that providing opportunities to enhance Jewish communal life is of utmost importance.

Two publications that influenced our decision were the 2007 *Metro Denver/Boulder Jewish Community Study* and the 2008 Rose Community Foundation report, *Legwork, Framework, Artwork: Engaging the Next Generation of*

Jews. Both described the growing Jewish community in the Denver-Boulder area. Few of us were aware of how many Jewish people under 40 were not engaged in Jewish life. An overarching question in our meetings became: How could we engage them? How could we recognize this diverse group – Jews by choice, interfaith couples, LGBT Jews – as an opportunity to encourage and develop a robust and vibrant Jewish community locally?

As we engaged in a consensus-building process, studied Jewish texts and learned from each other's experiences, our grant priorities emerged: engaging young Jewish adults in their 20s and 30s in Jewish community; and promoting participation in Jewish life and a sense of Jewish community for families with children ages 5 to 13.

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It's Not as Easy as Dropping Coins into the *Tzedakah* Box

by Avi Loewenstein, Roots & Branches Foundation member

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Tzedakah, charity inspired by the pursuit of justice, is a tradition of Judaism on par with matzo ball soup, movies on Christmas Eve and the struggle of standing through the concluding service on Yom Kippur. In Sunday school, we dutifully dropped our coins into tin *tzedakah* boxes, and we learned that the giving of *tzedakah* is a mitzvah, a good deed.

Drawing on this tradition, one of the very few rules governing Roots & Branches Foundation is that the grants that we make, our *tzedakah*, must be “primarily Jewish in nature.” We were told that we must decide for ourselves what this means, and that our goal for our first few meetings was to answer this question. However, this is a deceptively difficult question to answer.

While we know that *tzedakah* is our tradition, our childhood education ended there. We understood that we give *tzedakah* because, well, that’s what Jews do. We did not learn what makes *tzedakah* Jewish or to whom we should give *tzedakah*. **The world today is chock full of problems and organizations vying for our support. What problems should we address and to whom should we give?** If it were only as easy as dropping coins into the tin *tzedakah* box.

Does giving Jewishly mean that we must give only to Jewish organizations helping Jews? Alternatively, can we rely on a broad interpretation of *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, and give to non-Jewish organizations helping non-Jews in faraway lands? As we struggled to define what giving Jewishly means to us, we were assisted by a trove of traditional and non-traditional Jewish sources.

We studied Jewish thinkers from Maimonides to Maslow. The great Jewish thinkers, unsurprisingly, vehemently disagree with each other. “Two Jews, three opinions,” the saying goes. We studied Rabbi Heschel, who opined that Jews today are in a “spiritual emergency,” and that we should “give priority to teaching and inspiring our children to live as Jews.” In contrast, Maimonides argued that “we should treat resident aliens with the consideration and kindness that are accorded to Jewish people since we are commanded to sustain them,” and cited a verse from Deuteronomy holding that “you shall give it to the stranger who belongs to your community that he may eat...”

As we explored and discussed these sources, it was inevitable that we faced the important and challenging questions facing American Jews today: Is our unprecedented assimilation a good thing for our people and tradition? Given the success and prosperity of Jews in America, do we have an obligation to help those less fortunate prior to helping our own? We quickly realized that the exploration of these answers was really an exploration of our own Jewish identities. Whether we help Jews before others cannot be answered without first exploring what it means to be a Jew in America.

For me, this self-exploration and struggle was one of the most powerful aspects of my Roots & Branches experience. Roots & Branches is not about simply getting together and giving away a bunch of money. It is about exploring and shaping – individually and collectively – our Jewish identities as funders and leaders in our community.

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Creating Community through Song

by Michele Weingarden, Roots & Branches Foundation member

Heading out to a site visit with the Colorado Hebrew Chorale, the Holocaust was the furthest thing from my mind. I imagined they'd tell us stories of joyous concerts and festive holiday celebrations. Instead, this local music ensemble stunned me with their story about why they attempt to build community through music. On the day the gates of the concentration camps flew open, they said, the first thing survivors did while walking to freedom was sing the *Hatikvah*, a Zionist song from the late 19th century that would one day become Israel's national anthem.

Recalling this image sends shivers down my spine now, as it did during our discussion. What a powerful message about the depth and meaning song has to Jewish identity and culture. This meeting proved to be an inspiring introduction to the organizations that shape the diverse nonprofits in our Jewish community doing meaningful and heartfelt work. *My grantmaking experience with Roots & Branches opened my eyes to the generous work underway in our Jewish community, and I am not sure this exposure could have been obtained any other way.*

One of the missions we chose to support this year was Jewish cultural programming for school-aged children. While we documented several wonderful Jewish play-based opportunities for children during the preschool play years, we identified a gap in non-religious programming outside the classroom for children

between the ages of 5-13 to participate in with their parents. We sought to give Jewish families the opportunity to enjoy Jewish programming together.

The Colorado Hebrew Chorale is one of several proposals that fit this grant priority, touched our hearts and had a unique focus on music. The volunteer ensemble partners with Four Mile Historic Park to bring families outdoors during each season throughout the year to share Jewish music, art projects, and traditional Jewish food. This concept fit our criteria for programming that reaches beyond the central connected Jewish community and appeals to families regardless of their level of religious observance or affiliation. It also fit our desire to support programs that celebrate Jewish heritage through an inspirational, hands-on, community-building lens. We are excited about supporting this small, spirited group in growing its programming and taking the organization to the next level of development. Our group felt like we could really make an impact on the Colorado Hebrew Chorale's future. With this funding, the Chorale will launch a membership recruitment program, which will give it the ability to provide consistent programming for families for many years to come.

Our desire is to see new engaged faces, meaningful community gatherings, and lots and lots of singing to continue to celebrate the joy and soul of our Jewish heritage and future.

Your Turn: Get Involved

Rose Community Foundation is looking for a diverse group of Jewish people between the ages of 25 and 40 who want to be part of this collaborative grantmaking program in 2012-13. Visit rcfdenver.org/initiatives_roots.htm to learn more and to apply. The deadline to apply is Wednesday, May 30, 2012, however we request that you apply or indicate your intent to apply by Wednesday, May 16, so that we can schedule your interview.

Please contact Sarah Indyk at 303.98.7416 or sindyk@rcfdenver.org for more information.

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Enhancing the involvement of young adults in Jewish community will help Denver-Boulder be a welcoming community for Jews from all backgrounds. We chose to fund programs that were 'spicy' and innovative and that would appeal to those who were not Jewishly involved. We believe that engaging young Jewish adults is an *opportunity*, rather than a *threat* to the continuation of the Jewish establishment. We believe that the Front Range can become a place where young

Jews can debate and ask tough questions; a place where all are welcome; and a place where the value of *tikkun olam*, our Jewish responsibility to repair the world, shapes communal life.

As we asked ourselves questions about Jewish community involvement and how to encourage it, we all agreed that we had been given a gift in the opportunity to be part of Roots & Branches Foundation. As a result, we also set a priority to promote involvement in Jewish life for families with

children in order to ensure that the next generation of Jews will be involved from a young age. It is our hope that today's children will one day be asking similar questions: how will they engage their children in Jewish life and community? How can they pass on the values of social justice? We hope that our grants will help to ensure that current and future groups of young Jews will have similar opportunities to find meaning and community in Judaism in the future.



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Roots & Branches Foundation 2011-12 Grants

Engaging Families with Children Ages 5 to 13 in Jewish Life and Jewish Community

Boulder Jewish Community Center
(Boulder): \$4,000 for a series of Jewish family programs to take place in Louisville and Superior community spaces.
boulderjcc.org

Colorado Hebrew Chorale (Denver):
\$3,070 for a series of Jewish concerts and cultural programming for families.
coloradohebrewchorale.org

Ekar (Denver): \$6,400 for a series of family programs about farming, food justice, environmentalism and Jewish holidays. Denver Urban Gardens serves as fiscal sponsor.
ekarfarm.org

Limmud Colorado (Boulder and Denver):
\$3,635 for workshops to engage teams of family volunteers in developing two *Taste of Limmud* events.
limmudcolorado.org

Robert E. Loup Jewish Community Center with the Colorado Agency for Jewish Education and Hazon (Denver): \$9,500 for a series of programs to connect families to each other, to nature and to Judaism.
denverjcc.org
caje-co.org
hazon.org

Engaging Jewish Adults in their 20s and 30s in Jewish Community

Boulder Jewish Community Center
(Boulder): \$7,500 for a research project to interview 100 Jewish people in their 20s and 30s, and develop a network and a series of programs based on interview findings.
boulderjcc.org

Hebrew Educational Alliance (Denver):
\$9,200 for *JConnect*, a research project to interview Jewish people in their 20s and 30s, and empower them to create spiritual, cultural or educational programs for their peers.
headenver.org/jconnect.htm

Kehillath Aish Kodesh (Boulder): \$8,500 for *SoulFood*, a series of cultural events and conversations led in collaboration by an Orthodox rabbi and a Reform rabbi.
soulfoodboulder.org

Keshet (Denver): \$6,000 for a series of salons on the intersections of Jewish and LGBT life.
keshetonline.org

Limmud Colorado (Denver and Boulder):
\$3,375 for a series of gatherings on topics related to contemporary life and Judaism, including responsibility, language, memory and creativity.
limmudcolorado.org

Temple Emanuel (Denver): \$2,655 for *The Hineini Project*, a series of programs for young Jewish adults held outside of the synagogue, including text study, *Shabbat* and *Havdallah* celebrations.
emanueldenver.org/community/yjp

An additional grant will provide all grantees with training and individualized consulting in the use of social media as a marketing and engagement tool.