

ALYSSA ABRAHAMSON

Director of Arts, Jewish Culture & Adult Education at the 14th Street Y

How do you transform a JCC into an avant-garde cabaret? Invite creative Jews to indulge their imagination and sense of style while interpreting Jewish laws and themes related to *ha-guf* or the body. Strutting down the runway at the “Carnival of Style” was a wide array of people from diverse backgrounds: a woman wearing a Romanesque-style gown made of white paper decorated with Hebrew letters; a well-covered woman in a long denim skirt accented with a fuchsia boa showing her fashionable “*frum* wear” line, “Ghettofabulous,” designed for modest women who want to display an urban flair; and scantily dressed members of “KinkyJews,” one of whom displayed a tattoo of her Hebrew name alongside a Star of David while donning a *tallit*. The event is part of the 14th Street Y’s Jewish Artists Workshop where participants are given the opportunity to recast Judaism on their own terms. The Workshop provides opportunities for visual and performing artists to develop and present performances and exhibits based on a variety of Jewish-related themes and a forum for topical discussion and community building. “Carnival of Style” is a perfect example of how I have approached my career and my current position in the Jewish community. I envision, design and produce innovative and artistic Jewish cultural experiences for young Jews that inspire positive expressions of Jewish identity.



For the past two and a half years I have served as Director of Arts, Jewish Culture & Adult Education at the 14th Street Y in Manhattan. I am committed to creating unconventional Jewish arts and cultural opportunities for Jews to express their heritage, culture, and identity. I believe that interactions amongst Jews from diverse backgrounds enhance Jewish continuity and creativity. I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to work within the Jewish organizational world where I strive to encourage a spirit of openness and acceptance by engaging Jews where they are in their lives and interests.

My interest in the Jewish community and my relationship with Judaism was largely catalyzed by my experiences in Israel. I grew up with a minimal Jewish background and was always curious to learn about and connect to Judaism. My quest began as teenager on my first trip to Israel with the Alexander Muss High School program. I hoped to gain an understanding of and connection to Judaism, something I yearned for all my life. The program provided an intensive and meaningful educational experience rooted in Zionism, but didn’t offer me an understanding of the fundamentals of Judaism and spirituality. After graduating from college, I was determined to learn about Judaism and its ritual practices and how to integrate Judaism into my life. Mission accomplished. *Limnot U’Lehibanot*, an intensive three-month community service and education program based in *Tzfat*, gave me the experience, tools, resources and confidence I had hoped to gain.

With this new knowledge and passion, I felt driven to serve the Jewish community by working with students as a Jewish Campus Service Corps Fellow at the University of Minnesota Hillel. In my capacity as a JCSC Fellow, I was able to inspire Jewish students to embrace and celebrate their Judaism. I created meaningful opportunities for them to explore and strengthen their Jewish identities while also building a pluralistic Jewish community on campus. Engaging and empowering students to take ownership of their Jewish identity and expression was amazing and fulfilling. I knew that by serving the Jewish people, I had found my calling in life. My dedication to Judaism and the Jewish people deepened and evolved through continuing my formal Jewish education and through my Jewish communal work experience.

My extensive involvement in a variety of Jewish communal settings has given me insight into the challenges facing the Jewish world today and has strengthened my mission to enrich the Jewish community in relevant, creative and innovative ways. From my experiences in the organized Jewish world, I seek to integrate Jewish themes, content and informal education in the programs I produce, thus broadening the scope and enhancing the meaning of these events. One of my main goals has been to address Jews who may feel disenfranchised with Judaism. I believe that my commitment to reaching out to both affiliated and unaffiliated Jews through arts and culture has the power to build a stronger and more inclusive Jewish community and continues to help foster Jewish continuity. I am a firm believer that the power of the arts can renew Jewish life and provoke and inspire new ideas and community among people within and outside of Jewish institutional life. I am excited to continue on my path of applying my long-standing interest and involvement in the arts into a Jewish context by providing and inspiring Jews of all backgrounds and affiliations to new ways of thinking, feeling and experiencing Judaism and the Jewish community.

ALISHA GOODMAN

Deputy Director for Program Operation-Rita J. Kaplan Jewish Connections Programs at the Jewish Board of Family and Children Services

My commitment to working in the Jewish community began, like many of us, when I was living in Israel for the year. After two months of participation in a kibbutz ulpan program, I called my parents to tell them that my math career wasn't going to happen. As a participant in an enhanced kibbutz program in which we studied Jewish studies and identity, I quickly realized that I wanted to turn my interest into a career.

When I returned a year later, I began working in the Jewish community. Three years later, I entered graduate school; I came out two years later with two degrees and better prepared to continue working in the Jewish community. Armed with a Masters in Social Work, concentrating in Social Administration, and a Masters in Jewish Studies, I began working at the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, where I still am today. With each step, I became more sure of my path. My desire to work in the Jewish community turned to need, and I cannot see any other way for myself.

When I look back to those first moments of certainty, I recall terrific conversations about Jewish history, community and identity. My friends and I were full of passion, but I realized that my passion was also in the discussion and the exploration. My original impulse was to help others make these discoveries about themselves, and so I wanted to become a Jewish communal professional.

As my journey continued, my dedication to the Jewish community broadened. It is no longer just about working with my fellow Jews as we explore together the various dimensions of being Jewish. It is now also about helping the Jewish community in so many other ways – helping not only to enrich Jewish life, but also to provide some basic needs to all parts of our diverse community. Jewish life isn't just about education, spirituality and identity, but also about shelter, safety, and inclusion. Furthermore, my dedication to working in the community also encompasses living Jewishly and helping other communities, because as Jews, we are guided by values that command us to help others as well as ourselves.

Finally, I am dedicated to helping my peers become better professionals. I believe that we need to consistently update our abilities, challenge each other, and bring new skills to our profession. We should continue to grow as individuals and help our community simultaneously.



Nomination forms for the 2007 Young Professional Award will be available at www.jcsana.org in the Spring of 2007

ILANA AISEN

Education Officer at the American Jewish World Service

"Living is not a private affair of the individual; it is what we do with God's time, with God's world."

-Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

Passion for building community motivates the work I do with and for the Jewish people. Robust Jewish communities hold great potential for bringing greater justice, joy and holiness into the world.

In the Dominican Republic, I led a group of Jewish young adults that learned about *solidaridad* (solidarity) from Joseph, the founder of an organization which supports marginalized Dominico-Haitian communities seeking access to health care, education and political enfranchisement. To explain the value of our enthusiastic but unskilled physical labor, Joseph told us, "Solidarity is like air. You can't see it or feel it but you need it in order to live."

In Nicaragua, *acompanimiento* (accompaniment) is the motivating value for Dorothy, an American nurse who supports a women's cooperative by directing their reproductive health clinic in an isolated northern region. Her life's work is to stand alongside the women who determined to build a just community first by building their own homes and asserting their rights as property owners. For 15 Brandeis Hillel students and for me, Dorothy spoke indelibly about her journey toward living in harmony with her values.

The grassroots groups with whom AJWS partners speak a language of community that transcends cultural and linguistic barriers – it is in the air around them. Our North American Jewish volunteers struggle to reconcile the spiritual richness of the communities that we visit with their hosts' lack of material wealth. From participants, we often hear the phrase, "They're poor, but they're happy." While challenging our groups to adopt a more nuanced understanding of economic poverty in developing communities, we honor and build upon their experience of the often intangible yet soul-feeding power of community. In our discussions of *b'tzelem elohim*, we speak of Buber's I/Thou relationship and of Levinas' ethics of responsibility toward the Other.

Coordinating and leading many AJWS Service programs and, more recently, taking responsibility for the educational content of these programs is a privilege. This work has been significant in defining my adult self and will, I have no doubt, be the compass by which I navigate my career.

Working with other Jews to pursue justice for all those in need whether globally or locally is obligatory Jewish work. Regardless of the mission of the organization I serve, this value will stay with me. There is also crucial and obligatory work to be done within the Jewish community and it is likely that at some point, one or more of these issues will draw my professional and not only personal attention:

Jewish Community: Given North American popular culture's focus on individual acquisition and comfort, it is not surprising that many communities struggle to inspire participation. A belief that is implicit in much Jewish communal work is that we succeed by reaching individuals and families. What would happen if we changed our focus from 'selling' Judaism to individuals or even individual families and instead started from a place of commitment to community? This is the norm for the AJWS grantees which so deeply inspires our volunteers. Without minimizing individual needs, we should make normative a model of communities supporting and developing individuals who are not always the central means or end.



Jewish leaders must speak about our obligation to stand as a community to enact justice, rather than marketing what's-in-it-for-me programs as Jewish living. I am imagining, for example, broad-reaching communal expectations that steer us away from lavish *simchas* and toward community service requirements for all *b'nai mitzvah* students. If our message stands in harmony with our texts, traditions and values, it will enliven Jewish peoplehood. I believe that AJWS Service Programs so strongly affect Jewish identity because participants experience them as having this harmony: The curriculum is rooted in the Exodus narrative, the foundational, identity-forming story of our people, which teaches us to remember the stranger when we recall *yetziyat mitzrayim*. This message, paired with personal encounter with the oppression of poverty, is a powerful call to communal action.

Jewish Elderly: Weakened community ties are evidenced in the inability of many Jews, despite the best of intentions, to care for aging family members to the extent that our hearts and tradition require. Our success in assuring the dignity, joy and health of all elderly Jews – that we are able to treat our parents and grandparents with *kevod*, that we support one another through the uncertainties and pain of caring for aging and ill loved ones – should be one barometer of our communities.

Diverse Leadership: Peripherally involved Jews and those that have stepped away from Jewish community must be invited back. If the most engaged Jews are the only ones ‘at the table’, we’re having a conversation only with people for whom the system worked. We need to find and learn from the people who experienced Jewish life as broken. These people shouldn’t just be studied, but should also take part in defining community priorities and strategies. This will only work if they do not feel negatively judged or Jewishly illiterate when they join this conversation.

Jewish Supplementary School Education: Having grown up and taught in Jewish supplementary schools, I believe that this system sets the bar for Jewish education far too low to successfully build community and educate Jewish children. Jewish education needs to touch the spiritual cores and enliven the minds of learners and educators and we can’t rely only on day schools and camps to do this work. What if the energy and resources that currently produce uninspiring Jewish education were devoted to creating innovative programs which engage Jewish communities, families, children and adults in passionate struggle with and celebration of Judaism? Successful models, especially family education, experiential learning and service programs should be explored and expanded. At the same time, we should invest in fresh thinking and new programs.

Gender Equity: Before encountering AJWS, I did not describe myself as a feminist – to me this felt like an embarrassing, radical kind of identity. Over the past few years, I have taken on feminism through my actions: saying and doing things that unhinge, little by little, the limiting ideas I’ve received about gender. During the Muehlstein Institute for Jewish Professional Leadership, I learned that some Jewish professionals are addressing the structures that maintain gender inequity in our field. Aware of this work, I have greater confidence about being assertive and direct, even when these modes feel uncomfortable, and I often encourage women who are my colleagues to do the same. With these personal actions, I am helping to shape a community that creates space for women and men to determine our professional identities free of the gendered expectations that often hold us back.

Along with continuing to advance the work of AJWS, these are five areas in which I feel a strong desire to take leadership because, for me, living and working in partnership those with whom I share values, commitments, personal history, and common aspirations is deeply motivating and fulfilling.

When Dorothy spoke about *acompanimiento* she also said that after 13 years of hosting groups, she felt something special about the Jewish participants visiting the women’s cooperative. She told us that the AJWS group had a unique capacity for empathy with the suffering of others. While beautiful to hear, this was hard for me to understand, given that none of the students in our groups had endured the kind of suffering that Dorothy described. What made our group notably empathetic? For me, Dorothy’s observation confirmed that the stories we have received – relatives who survived the *Shoah*, friends who immigrated from countries where they could not freely express their Judaism, ancestors who were redeemed from slavery – shape our communal identity. I am committed to joining with my community to tell this unfolding story: of the Jewish people and of our role in the world.

Congratulations to all the winners!