

## The San Francisco Teen Initiative

NECHAMA IMBERMAN TAMLER AND TOBY E. RUBIN

There is a Hassidic story told about the difference between heaven and hell. In one room, we see a bunch of people who can't bend their arms at the elbow, sitting around a table laden with delicacies, but no one can partake of the festive meal. They are miserable, hungry... even starving. In a second room, we see another bunch of people with elbows that don't bend and a similar table arrayed with food, but everyone is happy. The difference is simple: in heaven, they have learned to feed each other.

The Teen Initiative of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties ("JCF") sets a table of service to Jewish youth around which each youth worker and lay advocate feeds another. In 1996, the JCF Teen Task Force (out of which the Teen Initiative evolved) reported on the best practices in Jewish youth work and our community's status in meeting the needs of our teens. The lay and professional members of our youth-serving community then developed a Three Year Plan to create or enhance opportunities for professional development, teen leadership, formal Jewish learning experiences, non-formal Jewish learning experiences and innovative strategies for teen outreach. The Teen Initiative arose out of our collective resolve to fully fund and implement the well-researched and thought out plans for serving teenaged youth.

There are at least three reasons that so many Jewish agencies, synagogues and funders have invested so much human and financial capital in this cooperative enterprise. The first is the emphasis on collaboration and the notion that "a rising tide lifts all boats." The second is a commitment to relationship-building, and

the third is the presence of several idea champions who hold an ambitious vision and are willing to bring others along to create a shared vision.

The first two chairpeople worked closely with JCF's planning and allocations department to establish a planning process involving a large cross-section of the community, including funders. They spent time outside of meetings in conversations with other lay leaders and community professionals to garner their support and to listen to their ideas. They worked closely with the JCF staff to produce a report that was based on research, deliberations and careful relationship-building with agencies and organizations already doing teen work.

The first three chairpeople of the Teen Task Force believed strongly in creating a culture that advocated for multiple, interconnected doorways to teen involvement. Inclusion of all current or prospective youth-service providers was essential for eliminating "turf" barriers. Cooperation and collaboration was also necessary to open new doorways as well as to connect those programs already established. Each chairperson had multiple connections in various settings concerned with teen programs, and this assisted in building credibility as well. Each enjoyed a good reputation and was a high-profile woman in the community, serving on foundation boards, on agency boards, and/or a national task force on Jewish teens. In fact, one was a past president of an agency that serves teens. Consequently, they moved in circles that included program providers, foundation board members and foundation staff. Their personal commitment to improving the communal support of Jewish teen programs created a buzz around the community. In Malcolm Gladwell's new book, *The Tipping Point*, he

argues that certain people are “Connectors,” people who know many more people than most of us; other people are “Salesmen,” enthusiastic advocates for a product or idea who can sell almost anything. Finally, there are the “Mavens,” who know a great deal about specific topics of interest. With the first three chairwomen, we were fortunate to work with “Connectors” who then became “Salesmen” and ultimately “Mavens.”

The second and third chairwomen developed a close relationship, seeing each other several times a week as they devised a planning process that was intended to build on the previous planning. The first process recommended some directions, but lacked sufficient detail. They began to strategize first with each other about how to push the agenda forward, and then with two major agency directors (the BJE and the JCCSF), some BJE teen staff, and the JCF’s planning and allocations staff. The partnership at this point did not include all of the funding resources of the JCF, but the steering committee quickly realized that the Task Force was looking at a much larger Teen Initiative, one that would require total community support. The chairs were willing to risk changing the way business is often done in the Jewish community in order to achieve a larger goal. They wanted representation from all funding bodies and wanted them involved in all the steps of the planning process. They wanted to make the Task Force an advocacy body for ALL teen programs that came to the table of the planning process.

The chairs re-assembled the youth-serving community to participate in a serious and credible planning process, which resulted in a Three Year Plan. The plan outlined in detail what needed to happen to increase teen participation in Jewish identity-building programs and services. There was participation from lay and professional partners as well as from staff members of funding organizations. The JCF dedicated staff time to this planning process over a period of two years. The planning process gave the lay leadership a solid foundation for making the case that the entire plan deserved funding. One of the chairwomen stated: “When you know you have people counting on you, you are willing to go to the mat, and then you have to find all possible partners and make the case to fund everything.”

The leaders of the Teen Initiative stress that cooperation and relationship-building is what ultimately led to funding. They took the time to listen and to keep everyone informed about what they heard in other conversations. Valuing everyone’s opinion and supporting the breadth of strategies for teen service surely factored greatly in obtaining the resources needed for implementation. It was part of the vision to build many programs simultaneously, to create excitement, to create opportunities for synergy across agency lines and to put teens on the top of the communal agenda.

What did they do to keep this perspective alive so that JCF and other funding sources knew that this was the most exciting local activity in which they could be involved? They wanted the funding partners to understand the importance of simultaneous program development, devote staff time to planning, and make major financial contributions to the programs designed by agencies and discussed around the planning table of the Teen Initiative. To accomplish this they made sure that funders were full partners, and worked to ensure their presence at every meeting; they also included funders as key members of the steering committee of the Teen Task Force. They benefited from the expertise that the funders brought to the table and found that they improved personal relationships as well. As a result, funders became advocates for and true partners in securing the dollars necessary for successful implementation of the plan.

An example of how funders can be brought into the process at the ground floor can be seen in the case of a private family foundation in which one of the senior program officers, a parent of teens herself, became heavily involved in one of the first collaborative projects, the San Francisco Havurah High School. The Havurah is a community-based, cross-denominational supplementary high school with three synagogue partners, and JCF, operated by the BJE. This parent/program officer took a leadership role in establishing that project and then continued to serve on the steering committee of the Task Force. She continues her involvement in key leadership roles several years later. Why? First, because she was asked. Second, because her opinion was valued. Third, because she saw results from the efforts. Fourth, because she had developed a personal relationship with the chair of the Teen Initiative.

Though serving the teens' best interests was the ultimate goal, developing personal relationships was also a key element to success. This became very helpful in establishing a shared vision, a sense of trust and a real interest on the part of those who could provide funding. Although it may not have been politically savvy, the lay leaders of the Teen Initiative listened to the program providers who worked directly with teens. They structured meetings so that the program providers would be in the same room as potential funders, lay leaders and volunteers. The program providers themselves are typically young, energetic adults committed to working with adolescents; they work for low pay and long hours but want to connect to the community and work for shared values. This voice had not been well-heard, and it was important to underscore the needs in the field that they were able to represent.

### The Present and the Future

We have been working to spread this vision for over four years, but the jury is still out on what will eventually happen with teen programs and support for them. We don't know how long we can sustain this high level of commitment, resolve and funding. The two leaders of the past three years have just turned the reins over to two new lay leaders. As the new leaders take their respective roles as chairperson and vice-chairperson, new subcommittee chairs need to be identified. Professional staff will continue to work with them to undertake new projects and develop new sources of funding. Past lay leadership will continue to be available to provide background and history and to help navigate political waters. However, the question still to be answered is this: How will we help funders establish ongoing endowments that are specifically targeted to teen programs that could never be sustained with fee-for-service?

We have learned many lessons over the past few years that we would like to share:

- 1 Spend time cultivating lay and staff (of agencies and foundations) who you believe share your vision for building teen programs and services.
- 2 Invite and involve funders at as many levels as possible in your planning process as full, active partners.
- 3 Hold onto your vision and keep articulating it

until you can recite it in your sleep.

- 4 Remember that change is incremental and that moving a community takes time.
- 5 Listen to program providers and make their case in the social and professional circles they can't reach.
- 6 Work with foundations on their time frame and be patient.
- 7 Dare to suggest new ways of working collaboratively.
- 8 Understand that collaboration is messy, time-intensive and demands extra energy and constant conversation, clarification, etc.
- 9 Be appreciative of everyone's contributions.
- 10 Be flexible, but stick to your ideals on what you know needs to happen.

The "rising tide" has truly elevated all of the "boats" to reach teens in our federation region. The collaborative efforts of lay leaders, staff and funders have been difficult at times but ultimately rewarding as teens by the hundreds benefit from those efforts on a daily basis. And one of the greatest joys is witnessing the unusually strong pride felt by the funders, who know that they have used their resources to build their community in a new and highly gratifying manner.

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