

Investing in People, Partners, and Practice

By Debbi Cooper

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SINCE THE INCEPTION OF PJ LIBRARY, the Harold Grinspoon Foundation (HGF) has understood that if we want to make Jewish life exciting and accessible to families, we need to invest in program professionals on the ground. Hundreds of these people around the world bring PJ Library to life in communities. The vast majority of them work for Jewish federations, Jewish community centers, and other Jewish organizations worldwide, but they are also very much a part of the PJ Library team.

Throughout the year, these professionals learn together and from each other in a myriad of ways. Online webinars, Communities of Practice, Jewish professional conferences, and the annual PJ Library International Conference all allow colleagues to gather, debrief, and share ideas. Professionals even visit each other's communities and bring back learnings to use at home. The practices, strategies, and teachings from PJ Library often make an impact beyond local PJ Library programs and inform how organizations can better connect to individuals in their communities. It's a powerful example of how a partnership can transform and impact Jewish life in the 21st century.

It's been 11 years since I launched PJ Library in Chicago. I'm now privileged to be the Director of Engagement for PJ Library, responsible for leading a team to design professional learning for our partners and nurture a network of dedicated professionals. We all work to strengthen program professionals' collective abilities to engage families in meaningful and high-quality Jewish life. Here are some of the important discoveries we've made as our work has grown:



Learning is an ongoing practice ... and takes practice.

Over the last few years, we have learned that “one and done” trainings just aren’t enough, so we’ve transformed those single sessions into multiday experiences. Now professionals can benefit from prework, in-person workshops, opportunities to practice learned skills, one-on-one coaching, and ongoing post-training learning. As a result of our recent “Engaging Families in Volunteering” workshop, program professionals held family volunteer programs across the US. In Washington, DC, 15 families gathered to put together five mitzvah projects to help people experiencing poverty or hardships; in Princeton, New Jersey, families made sandwiches and lunch bags for the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen. Each professional integrated the best practices we modeled, took advantage of one-on-one coaching, and received a subsidy from HGF for their supplies.

Everyone has something to learn, and everyone has something to teach.

What we teach often comes from the field experiences of our program professionals; it’s the result of their experimentation, reflection, and learning as they try different strategies to engage families in Jewish life. More than half of HGF’s workshop sessions and webinars are taught by program professionals. Some recent webinars include The Art of a Coffee Date, Creating Vibrant PJ Library and PJ Our Way Bridge Programs, and Getting Involved with Good Deeds Day.

In order to create community and Jewish learning for families, people need to experience Jewish community and learning themselves.

Each PJ Library offering for program professionals is intentionally designed to incorporate community-building and meaningful engagement with Jewish ideas and values. Each conference or in-person gathering begins with a peer group meeting that encourages relationship-building among participants and ends with group reflections and sharing. Through this experience, participants have a deeper understanding of how to build these connections within their own communities. Newer offerings, such as explorations around the latest in-the-envelope activity, the Parent Blessing Never Ender, provide program professionals with a vehicle for Jewish exploration and growth as *Torah L’shma* (learning for its own sake).

All this investment in our professionals yields incredible dividends. PJ Library has grown to be a beloved, integral part of Jewish life for thousands of families, in large part because of the talents, dedication, and enthusiasm of the professionals who bring PJ Library to life. Playing a role in the growth and development of PJ Library professionals is a privilege. I am grateful to work as part of an organization that understands and prioritizes learning and growth for its most important assets – its people.