

The Power of a Community

PJ Library doesn't happen on its own. These are the stories of three people in Greater New Haven who help make the magic happen.



► Kayla Bisbee: PJ Library program professional, Jewish Federation of Greater New Haven

If you had told me that I would be Jewish, married, and raising a daughter in the Jewish community of New Haven, Connecticut, by my 30s, I would have thought you had lost your mind. And yet, here I am, and I could not be happier. I grew up as a Southern Baptist kid in Texas. When I met my husband at a Christian college, we quickly wed and planned to devote our lives to Bible translation and church planting in Papua New Guinea. As he studied Greek and we both studied Hebrew, we started to ask a lot of hard questions. I still remember sitting in a bamboo hut in the rain forest as we discussed what it meant to no longer believe in what we were doing and what it would look like if we abandoned a belief system that we held on to so tightly. Ultimately, we left our mission organization and determined that further education would be the next step. My husband was accepted into a university in Dallas.

One day, a visiting Orthodox rabbi was

available for Q&A at the university. My husband mentioned he was Jewish by birth but was not raised in the religion. They began regularly meeting over Skype, and through these meetings my husband discovered he had many relatives in the Orthodox community, primarily in New Jersey and Israel. We also got connected with the local Orthodox community. I'll never forget sitting at the rabbi's table for Shabbat, watching him bless his children and experiencing the warmth and love. I immediately felt at home with Judaism.

Fast-forward through many Shabbats and many questions asked. My husband was accepted to a master's program in religious studies at Yale University, and we were off to Connecticut. Our rabbi from Dallas helped us get connected, and once I had my sponsoring rabbi, I began the process of an Orthodox conversion to Judaism. After spending a month in Israel, we finally had our Jewish wedding on the week of our 10th anniversary.

That same month, I began working for the Jewish Federation of Greater New Haven. It wasn't long before we welcomed our daughter, Naomi Hadassah. PJ Library immediately became a wealth of information and connection for me in my new journey of raising a Jewish daughter.

I soon transitioned into the role of family outreach coordinator and officially became a PJ Library program professional. Nothing could offer more job satisfaction than having the platform to connect with other families with diverse stories and backgrounds. I have enjoyed playing matchmaker for new parents looking for connection in their community.

More than anything, I am grateful for the gift of Jewish children's books from PJ Library and the gift of inclusivity and welcoming, low-barrier Jewish education that always has a bit of surprise and delight along the way.

Part of Kayla Bisbee's role in the Greater New Haven community is connecting PJ Library parents to each other.

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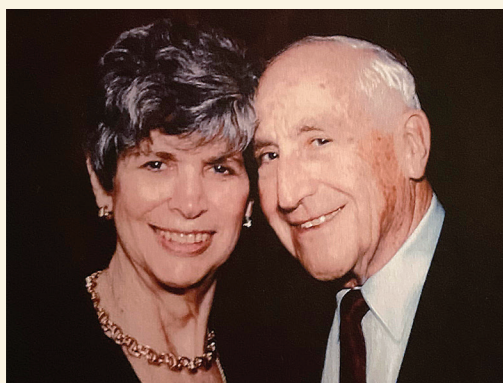
► **Heidi Hurwitz: PJ Library donor**

My husband Norman z"l and I enjoyed celebrating the Jewish holidays and creating family traditions. It was a way to share our Jewish heritage and customs.

I continue to support PJ Library because it makes Judaism accessible and helps families create their own warm memories. I like that the program gives young families the ability to learn about Jewish customs through the free books, and they can participate in programs such as listening to podcasts or attending online Havdalah events.

PJ Library is wonderful for adults, too, and creates opportunities for conversation about living Jewishly. I am proud to be involved with a program that helps families “do Jewish” and contributes to a vibrant Jewish future.

L'dor vador, from one generation to another.



Heidi Hurwitz, pictured with her late husband, Norman, gives to PJ Library to support the next generation.

COURTESY PHOTO

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HEIDI HURWITZ

WOULD YOU LIKE TO SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL PJ LIBRARY COMMUNITY?

Contact your local organization, email give@hgf.org to learn more, or go to pjlibrary.org/donate to make a gift today.

► **Judy Alperin: CEO, Jewish Federation, Foundation and JCC of Greater New Haven**

I remember when I was just starting my family and thinking about how kids don't come into this world with an instruction manual. How was I supposed to know how to raise them and keep them safe, healthy, and educated? How would I bring them up with a strong Jewish identity? Unfortunately for my children — and me — PJ Library did not yet exist. Among my peers, those fortunate to come from strongly identified Jewish backgrounds found pathways to Jewish life, but those who did not often drifted away.

With the greatest appreciation to PJ Library, today's lived experience is infinitely better. PJ Library brings the joy of Judaism to families raising Jewish kids. It provides an opportunity for the whole family to see the world through a Jewish lens based upon Jewish values. The books and materials benefit everyone.

The monthly packages from PJ Library are



Judy Alperin says PJ Library provides a road map on how to be Jewish.

COURTESY PHOTO

amazing, and their impact is elevated in combination with meaningful programming, support, and connection on the local level. Greater New Haven in Connecticut has benefited from PJ Library since its inception in 2005, and the level of engagement we are enjoying today is unparalleled. For the community, PJ Library is a trusted

and identifiable brand that opens the possibilities of collaboration and partnership with congregations and groups. PJ Library is a tangible and relatable investment of community philanthropy in action.

We could not be happier to be part of the PJ Library family and look forward to much continued growth and success. ■