

Jewish Community Center (JCC) History



We basically say that we are the proverbial “Big Tent” of the Jewish community. It is a tough thing. I think we accomplish it fairly successfully. We basically attract from the most orthodox Jews to people who are putting their foot in the water. We have a group called the Mother’s Circle which is a group of women who are married to Jewish guys. It goes the gamut. We don’t really emphasize the ritual of practice, but we do culture. Our goal is to try to help people feel good about who they are as Jews and to have the opportunity to explore who they are as Jews. (Interview)

Jewish Community Centers (JCC) serve as a combination of recreational facilities, cultural center, educational center, and social service agency in many Jewish communities. As with the Associated, the Baltimore JCC is one of the largest and strongest in the country. Since 2001, its vision has been to *create a new Jewish neighborhood* to replace the old geographic centers of Jewish life. Today, two state of the art buildings occupy prominent locations at the two centers of Baltimore’s Jewish community: Park Heights and Owing Mills. In addition to recreational activities, both facilities host early childhood education, programs for seniors, Jewish cultural activities, outreach activities meant to bring unaffiliated Jews into the Jewish community, and programs for people with special needs. Owings Mills also has a state of the art performing arts facility. The agency works closely with other Associated agencies, particularly Chai, JCS, Lifebridge, and now Shalom Baltimore, an outreach initiative with the Associated. Conference room facilities at Park Heights are regularly used by the Associated, its agencies, and other community groups for meetings.

While both facilities are distinctly Jewish and host similar programs, they have very different characters. Park Heights’ director is a modern Orthodox rabbi with strong ties to the Park Heights community. Its policies reflect the religious dictates of that community, including separate swimming times for men and women. Park Heights is also a major recreation facility for Jews and community residents living nearby. As such, one often sees a mix of ultra-

orthodox families, middle class whites in recreation clothes and an occasional African American. It is closely connected to the other Associated agencies located on the same campus or nearby.

Owings Mills is a large, rural property nestled in the woods off of a winding road in suburban Baltimore several miles above the city. The imposing facilities surrounded by parking, ball fields, a biblical playground, and swimming pools also includes a performing arts center at one end. The main building includes state of the art fitness wing, early childhood and social services wing, all joined together by a large, open lobby with Jewish stars on the floor and ceiling. This building is busy at all times of the day, with parking sometimes tight, usually with well-dressed adults or families in recreation or casual clothes coming to exercise, for day care, or for other programs. It also has a Kosher café.

While the two JCCs are clearly Jewish environments, they remain open to everyone in the community based on a strongly held belief in equality and equal access characteristic of most modern Jewish nonprofits. Key staff guess that approximately 15 percent of members are not Jewish. At Park Heights, JCC is a high quality recreational facility for African Americans and non-Jewish whites living in adjacent neighborhoods. At Owings Mills, it is “the Y for this area” because no other nonprofit recreational facilities are located in this portion of the Baltimore suburbs.

As outlined on the time line below, JCC evolved from one of the earliest organizations in Baltimore, pre-dating the federations by over half a century. However, by 1936, Jewish community central institutions had produced planning studies urging the earlier Y’s, camps, and educational centers to merge into one institution more sensitive to community recreational needs. The current JCC was born in 1951 after a self-study by the three core institutions reaffirmed the 1936 study findings and the Associated blessed the merger. The Associated also moved the newly formed organization up to what had become the center of the Jewish community in Park Heights. This new building was completed in 1960. Major renovations occurred at Park Heights in the 1990s, with newly renovated and expanded fitness facilities opening in 2000.

Firmly established as a core Associated institution by the 1970s, JCC and the Associated opened a new youth facility on a large property obtained from a Jewish family. The building was designed for expansion based on projections that a full center would eventually be needed in

the suburbs. At the time, only 75 Jewish families lived in Owings Mills, but an Associated study foresaw significant growth in this area. It is unclear if the presence of the JCC, and later senior housing built on the same property by Chai, drew population to this area or the Associated was correct in its projections, but by 2000, 7,600 Jewish households lived in the surrounding area (Hersch 2003: 1). Programs at Owings Mills have expanded over the years, with the Gordon Performing Arts Center opening in 1995 and major renovations in 2000. In 2008, JCC and the Associated planned to expand Owings Mills facilities again to provide space for social services through other Jewish agencies in the building. As such, Owings Mills is rapidly becoming a second Jewish community agency campus.

Current president, Buddy Sapolsky, and executive vice president, Dale Busch, both came to the agency in 1995, inaugurating a new era with significant growth and refocusing through strategic planning and visioning. A 1995 strategic plan revealed the need to re-vision the JCCs as replacements for the tight geographic neighborhoods, particularly for younger, non-Orthodox families rapidly dispersing throughout the Baltimore area and newcomers. This strategic plan created a goal of *creating Jewish neighborhood* within the walls of JCC through 1) enhancement of early childhood education, 2) enhancement of youth programs, and 3) enhancement of fitness programming and facilities. This led to expanded programming and building initiatives.

Concerned about increasing diversity in the Jewish community and the rapidly growing group of unaffiliated new Jews in Baltimore, many living outside of the traditional Jewish community, led to another visioning process in 2001. The resulting vision statement (JCC 2001) says that: *JCC will develop, promote and maintain a new Jewish neighborhood that strengthens and celebrates the Baltimore Jewish community by:*

- *Maintaining that all Jews are bound together as a community and responsible for one another*
- *Promoting an inclusive, spirited environment that celebrates the diversity of our community*
- *Developing mutually beneficial partnerships with other Jewish institutions*

Putting the visions of the 1995 and 2001 strategic plans and visioning processes in place has involved renewed outreach to synagogues and creating a number of initiatives to “put the J back in JCC” as several community leaders and JCC key staff put it. A 2007 strategic plan reinforced

these goals, with priorities to 1) develop significant endowments to continue enhancing facilities, 2) engage more Jewish families, and 3) enhance internal people processes to attract and retain quality staff, board and volunteers. Efforts to make the organization more Jewish include developing a variety of outreach activities for young adults and teens, including Sabbath dinners hosted at various synagogues and secular facilities in downtown Baltimore, increased Jewish programming, and other activities to increase Jewish identity. This has involved a careful negotiation with the synagogues, the core religious institutions. Besides active outreach to synagogues, JCC has developed a joint program with some synagogues for discounted synagogue and JCC membership in one package. As one leader explained:

We try to be very careful so we are not competing with the synagogues.

Therefore we don't do any kind of ritual practice here. We don't do bar mitzvahs, we don't do weddings, we don't do funerals. That is the job of the synagogues.

As the quote at the beginning of this history explains, the new vision has involved negotiating the different varieties of Jewish identity and levels of religiosity. JCC has endeavored to reach this goal through differentiating programs in the two culturally distinct centers, expanding programming, and creating more programs outside of facility walls. As discussed in more detail in the section on Jewish organizations earlier in the report, one major initiative involved the 30 year process of allowing the Owings Mills facility to open on Saturday. JCC argued that for non-religious Jews, JCC replaced time spent at synagogue, allowing them to relax in a Jewish environment rather than malls or other non-Jewish facilities. While fought by the Orthodox, the Associated passed this policy at the end of the study period in spring 2009. As such, the JCC in 2008 attempts to meet the needs of all of its members, although, like most core Jewish institutions, it sometimes becomes a foci for debate over defining Jewishness.

JCC of Greater Baltimore Timeline

- 1854** Group of young Baltimoreans form the Hebrew Young Men's Library.
- 1890** The Daughters of Israel establish a working girls' home on East Baltimore Street.
- 1896** The Maccabeans form in an effort to keep Jewish boys "off the street".
- 1909** Daughters of Israel and the Maccabeans merge to form the Jewish Education Alliance.
- 1913** JEA moves to 1216 East Baltimore. Dues range from 5 cents to 15 cents depending on the age of the member. The first operating budget is just over \$13,000.

- 1914** Camp Woodlands is organized and initiated by the Hebrew Benevolent Society to provide a meeting place in the country for women and children.
- 1916** First Young Men's Hebrew Association with 1,000 members giving a dollar apiece.
- 1926** Young Women's Hebrew Association merges with YMHA, buying a building on 301 West Monument.
- 1936** National Jewish Welfare Board does study that states that community recreational needs are not being met and duplication of services between JEA and Y.
- 1950** JEA and Y self study confirms observations of 1936 study, leading to initiatives to merge these organizations.
- 1951** JCC created by merging JEA, the Y, and Camp Woodlands. While initiated by agency directors, the Associated approves the merger and need for a new building in the current community center in Northwest Baltimore.
- 1960** Uptown Building at 5700 Park Heights Avenue Opens.
- 1978** Owings Mills 150 acre facility opens featuring the Dalsheimer Youth Center and the Jacob and Rose Shapiro Recreational Park. The Associated attempts unsuccessfully to open up Owings Mills campus on Saturdays.
- 1980** Peggy and Yale Gordon Trust created to encourage, promote, and sponsor art featuring the theme of Jewish heritage or art in Jewish cultural affairs.
- 1984** JCC counts 11,000 members provided with over 1,000 different activities per year. The agency becomes increasingly computerized, the Park heights gym is refurbished, the financial stability of the JCC is improved, and a marketing department is created.
- 1989** Agency commissions first member satisfaction study, which reveals most members were two couple families.
- 1990** National Jewish population study highlights high rates of intermarriage and changing family structure. JCC changes focus to encourage unaffiliated Jews, teens and other groups to use JCC facilities
- 1992** Baltimore hosts national Maccabi Games for teens and families, drawing in newcomers. Both local and national Macabbi events continue from this point on.
- 1995** Buddy Sapolsky hired as President and Dale Busch as executive vice president. Agency develops new strategic plan with focus on creating "a new Jewish neighborhood." Gordon Center for Performing Arts opens at Owings Mills.
- 1996** Agency launches capital campaign in coordination with Associated to expand and refurbish both sites.

- 1998** Park Heights renamed Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Center, Owings Mills renamed Ben and Esther Rosenbloom JCC on the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Campus based on major naming gifts from these donors.
- 2000** Owings Mills opens Harvey M. Meyerhoff fitness wing with Boltansky suspended indoor track. New fitness center completed at Park Heights.
- 2001** JCC engages in visioning process that retargets programs to create a “New Jewish Neighborhood.”
- 2007** Strategic plan focuses priorities on building endowment, improving internal staff and board processes, and engaging more families, particularly those outside of the two geographic centers.
- 2008** JCC and Associated plan to expand the Owings Mills center and move staff from JCS and other agencies into the new facilities. This would effectively create a second Jewish agency campus at Owings Mills.

Financial History

JCC Income Sources, Selected Years

Source	1983	1992	1996	1997	2005	2008
Program and Activity Fees	24.51%	41.61%	45.60%	46.50%	42.00%	41.30%
Membership Dues	17.60%	15.47%	18.20%	17.60%	27.00%	26.40%
Government and Foundation Funds	1.55%	0.53%	0.90%	2.70%	5.00%	7.30%
Rentals, Sales, and other Income	5.50%	6.58%	5.00%	4.60%	3.00%	6.10%
Associated allocation	50.84%	35.81%	30.20%	28.60%	23.00%	18.90%
Total	4,179,251	6,817,635	7,046,213	7,613,737	12,695,219	13,556,916

As table (n) documents, JCC income comes from a mix of fees, dues, grants, and the Associated. These percentages, drawn from annual reports, reveal a steady increase in income from memberships and a steady decrease in the Associated allocation as agency budget has

grown while Associated allocations have not kept pace. This is typical of both Jewish and secular agencies as annual individual giving remains at a steady percent while nonprofits like JCC continually expand services, upgrade facilities, and staffing costs rise leading to budgets in 2008 over three times that of 1983. JCC receives most of its funding from Jewish sources, the grants and contracts line includes only a tiny amount from government. However, the agency is currently researching ways to gain more funding from government and other non-Jewish sources.

In order to address decreasing Associated allocations, the agency has received permission for expanded fundraising through capital campaigns and the Jewish Hall of Fame event designed to raise funds for youth and special needs. This well orchestrated induction event/reception is both a fundraiser and opportunity to promote JCC goals to create community and enhance Jewish identity. JCC leaders explain their financial relationship with the Associated as follows:

The Associated here is a bit different from other communities. It is a bit more – I am going to use the word “controlling” but not in a bad sense. The philosophy of the Associated has been over the years that it is their job to raise the money in the community; it is not the agencies jobs, and they will “take care of the agencies”. It has worked well up until about five or six or seven or eight years ago. It still works but not as well as it did. What is happening is, as costs escalate, as fund raising has flattened, as needs have increased, there came a point in time that either agencies were going to bleed to death or basically revolt. Agencies have been given (at least we have anyway) a bit more flexibility in being able to raise our own money.

Relationship History

As this quote illustrates, JCC has a close relationship with the Associated. As a large, core institution in the Jewish community, it regularly receives a significant allocation from the Associated - one of the largest given to a single agency. In earlier periods, JCC struggled with budget deficits and even today, we heard repeated statements that the Associated would “work with JCC leadership” to control spending and encourage cuts. Despite some disagreements over money, the relationship between JCC and its Federation remains strong, supported by regular informal conversations between staff and lay leadership at both institutions.

JCC's relationship with the Associated involves much more than money. As key Baltimore Jewish institutions, there is a revolving door between lay leadership in the Associated and JCC. The two organizations jointly develop organizational leaders. For example, the Associated campaign chair during the study was a recent past president of JCC. Recent oral histories of JCC past board presidents from 1953 to 2007 revealed that only 3 of 22 were not born and raised in Baltimore (Schwartz 2008). The majority had been involved in the Associated before joining the JCC board, more than had belonged to JCC itself before becoming a volunteer. Many had come out of the Associated Young Leadership program. JCC presidents include both members of families with significant leadership in the Jewish community as well as some less prominent families. This relationship goes both ways, with JCC leaders also involved with the Associated.

JCC's relationship to the synagogues and Temples is more complex. Synagogues often view JCC as competition for Jewish memberships and Baltimore rabbis are no exception. Dale Busch started active outreach to synagogues after her arrival in 1995, and the JCC now has a number of initiatives to engage rabbis and synagogue leaders. This remains an ongoing effort. A rabbi is also appointed to the synagogue board.

Assessing the relationship of the organization to the wider Jewish community is difficult in a study of this nature. However, we did note active use of JCC facilities and programs throughout the study. As the Sabbath closing issue demonstrates, JCC is a lightning rod for different groups' efforts to define what it means to be Jewish. This is particularly true for an institution focusing on Jewish culture and deliberately reaching out to unaffiliated, presumably less religious Jews. Occasionally, both Orthodox and Conservative religious Jews would comment that "the JCC is not even Jewish" because agency programs did not follow their particular branch of Judaism. However, the steady stream of Orthodox Jews at Park Heights and draw of other programs suggests that JCC is achieving its goals to provide appropriate facilities for people from all branches of Judaism. Only further study of agency participants would provide adequate information on its reach and relationship with Baltimore's diverse Jewish community.



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