Affiliate Community Services

All over the world, Jewish women who are members of ICJW affiliate organisations support their local communities with a wide variety of services. Many ICJW affiliates are stretching their community service work into innovative programs suited to their local community needs. In many cases there is a cross-over between what has been known as “community service” and educational or arts programs, which meet different needs for women of the community. In this article a sampling of recent projects showcases new developments in affiliates’ community service work, which we hope will inspire all our affiliates worldwide.

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COMMUNITY SERVICES REPORTS

HUNGARY

Katalin Pecsi, leader of the Hungarian ICJW affiliate “Esther’s House”, explains that rather than dealing with the traditional women’s issues, they instead focus on the social problems of Jewish women, as represented through culture and art. They have organised discussions, readings and story-telling evenings on topics relating to Jews and to women. They recently organized a conference on “Liminality – what does it mean to be both Jewish and a Woman – in literature and film? ”

Esther’s House has also initiated dialogues with other communities, including non-Jewish Hungarians and the Roma people, and their discussions on gender and on Jewish topics have also included Jewish men from the community. In their community work, they bring together elderly Holocaust survivors and school children to meet and talk together at the Holocaust Memorial Centre in Budapest.

SLOVAKIA

In March 2008, the members of Slovakian ICJW affiliate ESTER Association staged a highly successful Gala Program in Kosice in recognition of the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel, and commemorating the sad anniversary of the first transports of Jewish women from Slovakia into concentration camps. The event included a performance by the Yocheved Dancing Group. Marta Gyorirova reports that their organization realized how wonderful and rich our Jewish culture is, and that they view this special event as a successful step on the way to building tolerance and a society without racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism. Particularly notable was the participation of Kosice Mayor Knapik Ing, under whose auspices the event took place in the splendid historical Kosice Town Hall with an audience numbering more than 300 people, many of them non-Jews.

SOUTH AFRICA

The Union of Jewish Women of South Africa has a long history of support for the general community of South Africa, and their branches have responded to recent crises in the region.

In May 2008, South Africa experienced a Xenophobia Crisis which affected foreign refugees. The UJW was instrumental in arranging emergency supplies for homeless refugees in the form of food, clothing and blankets. UJW offices were used as a depot for the delivery and collection of these items, and UJW members distributed them at the refugee accommodation centers.

The East London Branch of the Union of Jewish Women of South Africa recently introduced two new community service projects to meet special needs. When the area was stricken with power blackouts in East London, UJW members attempted to assist all Kosher Meals-on-Wheels recipients and Jewish families on social support by providing them with vacuum flasks and torches. They also began work on a new project to support rape victims in their city. The Living Waters Rape
In October 2008, NCJWA NSW launched the Jewish Women Breast Cancer Network at their Pink Sunday Celebration of Life event. Over 80 people participated in breast cancer awareness activities, with lectures about the disease and the importance of early detection using thermography as well as mammography. Pink silhouettes were purchased and placed in the Sukkah to raise funds for Australia’s Breast Cancer Network.

SPAIN

The annual highlight event for CEMI Madrid is the Almuerzo de la Abuela which is a lunch in honor of grandmothers (which includes most of the members of the organization). Every woman brings a dish of food and together these make up a marvelous combined buffet meal. Eva Benatar reports that this year 82 women attended plus 5 men (invited for the first time), and the successful event raised money to fund three scholarships for summer camps for children of the community, as well as contributions to support the Bellinson Hospital in Israel and the Zichron Menachem cancer charity.

INTERFAITH REPORTS

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

In July 2008, Sharon Shenhav was a guest of the ICJW affiliate in Bosnia, the University of Sarajevo and the Bosnia International Forum. Elma Softic-Kaunitz, Secretary General of the Jewish Community of Bosnia-Herzegovina and La Benevolencia, gave Sharon a tour of the recently renovated synagogue and community center building which had been shelled in the war in the 1990’s. ICJW affiliate members were invited to attend Sharon’s lecture at the University of Sarajevo where she spoke to Muslim and Christian graduate students in the Program on Religion and Human Rights about Judaism and Women. The Bosnia International Forum had invited Sharon and Rabbi Miriam Hamrell of Los Angeles to speak at a public event entitled “Female Leaders in Jewish Tradition”. The evening program was attended by members of the Jewish community as well as a large number of Muslims and Christians.

NEW ZEALAND

Jewish Women of New Zealand arranged another meeting of Interfaith Women's Group at the Wellington Jewish Community Centre. Shirley Payes reports that there were 23 women present representing Hindu, Muslim, Christian (most branches), Buddhist, and Jewish faiths. Each woman had been asked to bring something religious that had special meaning to her, and to give an enlightening talk about the item. This was followed by a delicious kosher lunch and one of the Buddhist women took the participants on a meditation walk. Each of the religions then gave an overview of their religion and traditions.

At the previous meeting the women had done drawings on a patch of material and these were put together into a quilt. This time the participants were asked to sew buttons onto the quilt as a way to finish the project and, while sewing, women had the opportunity to question each other about religion in a relaxed atmosphere. Others sat in groups discussing traditions and dietary needs of the various religions. The local Rabbi had given his permission for this interfaith meeting to take place in the synagogue, and when the Muslim women used it to say their prayers before lunch and tea, it was clear how very suitable this venue was.

ISRAEL

The annual conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews and the Inter-religious Coordinating Council in Israel was held in June 2008 in Jerusalem. Its theme was “The Contribution of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue to Peace Building in the Middle East”. At the end of the conference, Dr. Debbie Weissman was elected the new chairperson of the ICCJ - the first woman to hold this position. Visit the ICJW website interfaith section to read Judy Telman’s detailed and fascinating report in full.
Crisis Centre provides sleeping accommodation for women in emergency situations, and the local UJW volunteers are supplying victims with care packs containing soap, shampoo, hair conditioner, face cloth, deodorant, panties and a caring note. Age appropriate packages are also provided for babies and children, including candy and teddy bear toys knitted by UJW members. Additionally UJW will be supplying towels to the Rape Crisis Centre.

The Habitat for Humanity Building project was another major exercise whereby UJW Cape Town built two houses simultaneously. They were built in Mfuleni - a relatively new township about 25 miles from Cape Town, which is known as a community of shack dwellers because the majority of its residents reside in overcrowded structures made of tin, with no formal water supply, electricity or toilets. Habitat for Humanity is a special project designed to expedite the building and provision of houses in such township communities.

UJW Cape Town approached various partners in a bid to make it an inter-faith, cross-cultural, bridge-building experience. They brought together Power Construction, Associated Magazines, Habonim, South African Women in Dialogue, the Rotary Club of Sea Point as well as four UJW groups - Kesher, Constantia, Milnerton and Na’Arot. Together they built both homes in just five days, with the work mainly done by women with help from five men. Participants were involved in mixing concrete with spades, shovelling it onto wheelbarrows which were then wheeled up a ramp to the building teams. Others stood in lines passing cement bricks and necessary equipment. The new home owners provided workers with food and the symbolism of ‘breaking bread’ together was felt and appreciated by all the participants. On the final day of the project, the keys to the homes were handed over to the delighted new owners in a simple but moving ceremony.

AUSTRALIA

National Council of Jewish Women of Australia, New South Wales Division has successfully embarked on a new Community Service which actually originated in the United States and Israel and has been successfully established in Sydney. “Mum for Mum” is an ongoing home-based family support program that matches trained and supervised volunteers with the mothers of new babies. NCJWA NSW recently introduced this professionally supervised program and recruited its third intake of volunteers.

The volunteer’s role is to establish a nurturing and supportive relationship with the mum, serve as a role model, recognize and reinforce the mother’s own strengths, share her experiences and offer guidance in problem-solving, helping to build each mother’s self-esteem and competence. The volunteers are usually mature mothers with experience of raising their own children/grandchildren, who are willing to offer non-judgmental support to new mothers for 3 hours each week for one year. The trained volunteers are provided with continued coaching, as well as personal and group support throughout the period.

More than 50 people attended the “Mum for Mum” Volunteers’ Graduation at Sydney’s Council House in August 2008. The patron of the program reminded NCJWA members that although we expect pregnancy and birth to be happy times, many women do experience difficulties. The Head of Social Work at Royal Hospital for Women, who refers mothers in need of support to the program, said that while the hospital prepares women for the shift into parenthood, many new mothers still experience anxiety and a sense of isolation after birth. NCJWA welcomes Jewish and non-Jewish women as volunteers and as recipients of the Mum for Mum service.

A very different community service was provided by NCJWA NSW as part of the World Youth Day events held in Sydney during July 2008. World Youth Day 08 attracted 223,000 Catholics, including 110,000 from 170 nations. Events throughout the week were attended by the Pope, and generated a feeling of remarkable goodwill and accord between people of all faiths and cultures. NCJWA hosted an enjoyable series of Israeli Dance Workshops and many young Catholic people came to learn Israeli dances and eat typical Israeli foods.
Help for Israeli Agunot

On Wednesday, November 5, the Israeli Knesset passed by a vote of 58-21 an amendment to the Israeli Property Relations Law. This amendment separates the date of the division of property from the actual receipt of the get, thus limiting the possibility of extorting women who are in need of a religious divorce.

This achievement was the culmination of years of work on the part of the ICAR coalition, of which ICJW is an active part, as is NCJW-USA. Women in Israel regard the passing of this amendment as nothing less than a historical moment in the struggle for solutions for the plight of agunot and mesurovot get in Israel. May we continue on this path until we reach full success on this issue all over the world.

Durban Review Conference, April 2009

Jewish organizations and countries sympathetic to Israel are still undecided whether to attend or boycott the Durban Review Conference in Geneva (Durban II), scheduled for April 2009. The UN Preparatory Committee has drafted the document which is to be adopted at the Conference, reflecting negotiations between the different groups of countries involved.

This Durban II Draft Outcome Document appears to reinforce the sentiments expressed at the UN World Conference Against Racism, held in Durban, South Africa in 2001, accusing Israel of apartheid, crimes against humanity and genocide.

The five-part document contains 88 pages and 646 provisions which largely repeat the themes of the 2001 anti-Israel and anti-Semitic hate festival. These themes are:
(1) Racism is everywhere;
(2) The fault for this lies with the West, because of its "genocidal" legacy of slavery and colonization;
(3) "Islamophobia" and discrimination against "people of African descent" are especially prevalent and pernicious; and
(4) Israel is a blight upon nations (Paragraphs 114-117 of Section 1, for instance, are dedicated exclusively to bashing the Jewish state. No other country is singled out in the whole document).

As NGO Monitor points out, the first Durban conference became an instrument for racism itself, particularly directed against Israel, and the event had a tremendous impact on promoting the demonization and delegitimization of Israel.

This Draft Outcome Document gives tremendous cause for concern. If this is the planned agenda, ICJW affiliates and members are urged to continue to monitor developments and keep tabs on what governments and international Jewish organizations are doing as we come closer to the April 2009 Geneva event.

To read an eyewitness report from the 2001 Durban Conference and a full analysis of the Draft Outcome Document by the NGO watchdog Eye on the UN, visit the ICJW website.

CALENDAR EVENTS

January 25, 2009       North American Conference
January 26, 2009       Administrative Meeting in Florida, USA
May 17-20, 2009       Herczeg Jerusalem Seminar in Israel
May 21, 2009           Executive Meeting in Israel
November 2009          Administrative Meeting in Prague, Czech Republic
February/March 2010    Administrative Meeting in Israel
May 6-12, 2010         Convention & Executive Meetings in Cape Town, South Africa

WEBSITE NEWS

The Swiss Jewish Newspaper Tachles chose to highlight the ICJW website as its “Website of the Week” in October 2008 – visit www.icjw.org to see why!

The Liga Feminina Israelita do Brasil in Rio de Janeiro has launched a new website: www.lfib.org

The NCJW USA website has been redesigned and relaunched: www.ncjw.org