



Jewish Family Services
of silicon valley

2021 Mindy Berkowitz Annual Meeting Speech

Every year through Jewish Family Services' Annual Meetings we have the pleasure of honoring and celebrating people who go that extra mile to help others have better lives.

Jewish Family Services of Silicon Valley occupies a special place in so many hearts - and I believe it is because **we put people first**. In fulfilling our mission to empower people to face their life's challenges we ensure that they feel welcomed when they arrive and cared for throughout the time they spend with us.

In the two years since we began incorporating person centered/trauma informed care our staff have been learning about techniques that focus on what a person needs – not merely on the services we have. I'm so proud of the work our staff are doing with recently arrived refugees, older adults (including Chai House residents and our local holocaust survivor community), and adults and families who are doing their best to make it during a period like none other. Time and time again, our clients tell us how they feel **so cared for** by our staff, and by our volunteers who have brought them meals, medicine and groceries – and connection - each week.

As you know, we apply personalized attention to our work with refugees. With the new Presidential administration approving a much higher number of refugees who may enter the country, we are expecting **three times** the current amount of refugees to enter Silicon Valley beginning in the fall. Most refugees have extraordinary needs. Our refugee services staff and volunteers under Zoya Lazer's leadership provide a warm, safe welcome and new beginnings to each new refugee arrival. Much gratitude goes to Natalie Lazar, Azita Eshagh, Danya Hazeghi, Nellie Rochon-Ellis and Marianne Poblentz- and the many volunteers who help create new homes, new jobs and new lives in America. I'd like to give a special shout out to our Refugee Services Housing Committee members including Alice Go-sack, Jessica Intrator, Linda Levenson, Susan Lewis, Debbie Michels and Marlene Somsak. Later tonight we'll honor several refugee services volunteers for their selfless contributions.

Many of you know firsthand how volunteering through JFS is so incredibly rewarding. Our volunteers are busier than ever – and transitioning back to in-person service. We're proud tonight to honor Lynn Ann Levi, the volunteer chair of our wonderful Knitzvah group, whose able leadership ensured that **thousands** of people felt the warmth of Knitzvah's fuzzy embrace. Some of you may have held back from volunteering during the pandemic. Perhaps it's time to come back – or come to – the friendly volunteer engagement department. Lori Cinnamon and Avery Kaufman want to hear from you and set you up with a lifechanging volunteer activity.

Another standout has been our decades-long relationship with Chai House. We have **loved having a branch office onsite** where we support the residents. Throughout the years we have increased the residents' social connections, ensured that they have enough nutritious food, and helped them through many rough times. Our staff, Sumi Kamiya and Caroline Golpashin (along with Fern Adamkowski and Rabbi Barney Brickner) – along with many others, notably Avital Agam and Galina Chyorny – over the years have been wonderfully attentive. Sumi's creative approaches to combatting isolation have earned the admiration of many, and we're proud to honor her tonight. You might be aware that Chai House has been sold to another management company. I'm very thankful that under Associate Executive Director Susan Frazer, **we're doing all we can** to forge new relationships and continue this fine partnership.

2020 was traumatic for so many reasons. After the horrific murder of George Floyd and others, we began to awake to the reality that we need to become educated to some difficult truths as individuals and as an agency. We formed a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee that meets regularly to **understand and inform, and inspire change** at JFS. Fern Adamkowski, Barney Brickner, Sumi Kamiya, Sandra Pannell, Danya Hazeghi, Nellie Rochon-Ellis and Susan Frazer are helping us to broaden ourselves so that all are **received, accepted and celebrated**.

Our JFS community engagement programs help us create something bigger than ourselves. Next week we begin our 7th annual Equipped to Learn Back to School Drive, where you can help students of all ages return to school with the new supplies they need to be successful. We have our first 2021 order for Centerpieces for Tzedakah – and we're so excited about the chance to help people celebrate in person once again. Embrace-A-Family and Good Evening JFS! were amazing this year as we pivoted to online programs with more participation than we've had any other year. Let 2021 – and 2022 be the years when we welcome you in person – or virtually – as we go forward to even greater forays into the community.

As you know, these programs don't happen in a vacuum. We're fortunate to team up with Jewish Silicon Valley, Yavneh Day School, our local synagogues, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints to help people lead better lives. These good friends have worked with us throughout the pandemic to ensure that people have food, mental health support, housing, computers and other basic necessities. Our individual and corporate donors along with our government-funded partners provide essential financial support. Once again, we're so grateful.

I must also mention the hard work that goes on behind the scenes every day at JFS that holds us all together. All of us staff and Board are very appreciative of the professional administrative teamwork we receive from Elena Kulvets, Tami Levi and Meri Zavorine. And we're excited to welcome newcomers Lucy Istomina and Polina Gurvits who have begun working with holocaust survivors; and Lucy Ellis, our new Marketing Consultant who will help transform how we present ourselves and engage our stakeholders.

2021 is a **big year of change** for JFS. We're welcoming many new faces on our staff and Board – and doubling our office space on the campus. We're excited to emerge from the 2020 cocoon and have our biggest budget ever – and the future is looking bright.

I'm so grateful to have had three wonderful years with Joe Isaacson as our President, and I'm so glad that he's remaining on our Board because he's a great leader and a fine mensch. I'm really looking forward to working with incoming President Ruth Bareket. She's been an incredible member of our Personnel Committee and I've relied on her integrity and expertise many times.

Thank you all for being the blessings you are, and part of the most special team I know. We have gotten through these tough times together. Jewish Family Services of Silicon Valley will be there for you in 2021 and beyond – so hang in there and stay with us. Thank you!