

State & Local

Local federation receives major birthright israel grant

by Johanna Ginsberg
NJJN Staff Writer

United Jewish Communities of MetroWest New Jersey is one of nine recipients of a two-year, \$100,000-per-year grant from the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies designed to increase community contributions to and interest in Taglit-birthright israel.

The grants enable each community to hire a "brand manager" responsible for raising funds and awareness of the program that offers free 10-day trips to young Jews in the community.

Rebecca Hoffman, 25, began as

brand manager for UJC MetroWest in March. She is reaching out to local synagogues and organizing the first New Jersey alumni event on Tuesday, Aug. 21, at the Diva Lounge in Montclair. Her goal for the first year is to raise \$250,000, with a longer-term goal of \$500,000.

Birthright israel was originally planned as a three-way partnership among the government of Israel, private foundations, and communities, according to Jason Soloway, director of special projects for the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies. "The government has done a good job; the philanthropies have been remarkably generous. The communities have

done a decent job but it really varies from community to community. Some communities have not felt a sense of ownership."

Soloway said UJC MetroWest has always had a good track record. While all federations are asked to allocate a set amount to birthright israel, not all follow through. MetroWest regularly gives its requested amount of \$152,000;

before the grant was implemented locally, it also raised an additional \$75,000 for birthright israel.

The demand for birthright israel trips far exceeds current capacity. Applications in 2007 have already topped 50,000 for 29,000 slots, said Soloway. "We're trying to create more supply," he said.

Launched in 2000, birthright israel by the end of August will

have sent 145,000 people from 52 countries on free trips to Israel. There are about 1,000 alumni from the MetroWest community.

Soloway said 20 communities applied for the grant; the nine were selected on the basis of their level of interest, human resources, financial resources, and numbers of

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Liaison to birthright program consults with local leaders

LEONARD COLE — an expert on bioterrorism and terror medicine, adjunct professor of political science at Rutgers-Newark, and author of eight books, most recently *Terror: How Israel Has Coped and What America Can Learn* — is also national United Jewish Communities' liaison to birthright israel. On Aug. 9, he came to the Aidekman Family Jewish Community Campus in Whippany to consult with United Jewish Communities of MetroWest NJ leaders about the program that offers free 10-day trips to Israel. The Ridgewood resident said he feels a "serious obligation" to the project.

He explained in a separate interview with NJJN how deeply he believes in the goal of birthright israel. He said that at the November 2006 UJC General Assembly in Los Angeles,

Yeshiva University president Richard Joel "spoke of birthright israel as the greatest invention of the Jewish community as a rite of

'For too many people, bar and bat mitzva is a rite of passage out of Jewish life, and birthright israel is an entry, or reentry, into it.'

passage since the bar and bat mitzva. Everyone applauded and gave him a standing ovation.

"But I realized soon afterward that he was only half right," said Cole. "For too many people, bar

and bat mitzva is a rite of passage out of Jewish life, and birthright israel is an entry, or reentry, into it."

Cole has long been involved in the local and national Jewish community; he served as president of the Bergen County federation while it became the UJA Federation of Northern New Jersey and was national chair of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs in 2000-01.

A secondary appeal of the birthright israel project, Cole said, is its focus on young people. "I always enjoy working with young people, and I find enormous enjoyment in seeing changes in the hearts and souls and thoughts of so many young Jews."

It was on a 1976 trip to Israel

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Leonard Cole, national United Jewish Communities liaison to birthright israel with Rebecca Hoffman, United Jewish Communities of MetroWest NJ's birthright israel brand manager. UJC MetroWest was one of nine recipients of a grant from the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies to engage a brand manager whose role is responsible for increasing awareness of and investment in Taglit-birthright israel.

Photo by Johanna Ginsberg

Same-sex couple spars with church in Ocean Grove

by Robert Wiener
NJJN Staff Writer

Two Jewish lesbians are at the center of a federal case that pits the state of New Jersey against a Methodist church group in the town of Ocean Grove.

The central issue is whether a religious group may deny facilities to people for a use that runs counter to its strong opposition to same-sex unions — a matter that could also affect Jewish institutions opposed to gay marriage.

In March, Harriet Bernstein, a 10-year resident of the historic beachside community, and her partner, Luisa Paster, applied to hold their civil union ceremony at an open-air building called the Boardwalk Pavilion.

Like much of the rest of the land in Ocean Grove, the boardwalk and the pavilion are owned by the Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association, an organization affiliated with the United Methodist Church.

It denied the two women permission.

The church's *Book of Discipline* states that "ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions...shall not be conducted in our churches."

But in a telephone interview with *NJ Jewish News*, Bernstein argued that the pavilion was "a public accommodation. It is owned by the church, but it is used by people for all kinds of reasons."

"There is no indication...that it is a church," said Paster. "Although it is used for religious services, it is also used for many other purposes — band concerts, weddings. It has always been open and not closed to anyone."

In June, Paster and Bernstein filed a discrimination complaint with the State Division of Civil Rights against the Camp Meeting Association.

Another same-sex couple, Janice Moore and Emily Sonnessa, filed a similar complaint in July after also being denied use of the pavilion.

The CMA responded on Aug. 11 with a federal lawsuit charging that by accepting the complaints, the Civil Rights Division was violating the church group's religious freedom.

Brian Raum, the Arizona attorney who is representing the CMA, is asking the Federal District Court to halt the civil rights investigation. "There is no authority for the state of New Jersey to apply the law against discrimination to the Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association. The investigation is inconsistent with the First Amendment," he told NJJN.

"For 100 years the Camp Meeting Association has owned the property. They control it, and the fact they allow passers-by to sit down and enjoy the facility is no different than St. Patrick's Cathedral. You can walk on Fifth Avenue and walk in St. Patrick's and enjoy it. You can't force them to hold a ceremony that negates their religious beliefs."

Allowing non-Methodists to



The Ocean Grove Boardwalk Pavilion, focal point of the controversy.

conduct weddings at the pavilion "is not inconsistent with the association's religious beliefs," said Raum, senior legal counsel for the Alliance Defense Fund, a "Christ-centered" organization that litigates against accommodations for

same-sex unions. "These civil union ceremonies are absolutely inconsistent with their religious beliefs, and they have an absolute right to control their facilities," said the attorney.

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alumni.

The grant amounts vary from community to community and range from \$75,000 to \$150,000 per year.

Those selected include six federations, two individuals working on behalf of larger communities, and United Jewish Communities, the umbrella organization for all North

American federations. Recipients include United Jewish Federation of San Diego, Jewish Federation of Orange County (California), Jewish Federation of Los Angeles, UJA Federation of Northern New Jersey, Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston, an individual based in New Orleans who covers the southern region of the United States, and a

New York based-individual covering the metropolitan area.

Preregistration for MetroWest's winter birthright israel trip is now open; those interested in participating should visit www.ujcnj.org/freetrip-toisrael.

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LIAISON

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that Cole's own Jewish identity stirred. "I felt an identity and sense of kindred spirit that I had not felt before I went. I was not at all active in the Jewish community at the time. There was no light switch," he said, but rather a grad-

ual growth in his activities on behalf of the Jewish community.

Terror is his first book that pulls together his Jewish and academic interests (see "Fear and Coping," *NJJN*, Aug. 2, page 28). He is quick to point to the irony of his

current major undertakings. "My major activities of interest are terrorism and birthright israel. It's the worst, shadowy dangers the Jewish people face and the brightest. I live on those extremes."

— JOHANNA GINSBERG

My people's homeland, my spiritual home

by **Jennifer Lava**
Special to *NJ Jewish News*

I always knew that I wanted to visit Israel. I expected an amazing experience — friends who had participated in previous trips told me that much. But what I did not expect when I boarded that El Al flight was to feel like that plane, which was taking me so far away from where I had lived all my life, was, in fact, taking me home.

I had applied to birthright

First Person

israel twice before and hoped the third time would be the charm — luckily it was. Thankfully, a very generous gift to birthright from Miriam and Sheldon Adelson helped eliminate the waitlist for the summer 2007 trip. I finally had my chance to participate in a trip I had longed to go on for more than two years, and for that I am eternally grateful.

The idea of visiting Israel has long captivated me; the country was fixed in my mind as a foreign and even exotic place. Although I felt personally tied to its history as the homeland of my people, the popular images of Israel's desert landscapes, ongoing conflict, and religious relics made it feel geographically and experientially distant from everything I knew. I realized immediately that those images are totally misleading and that Israeli life is, in fact, rich and vibrant. There is this energy that touches everyone and everything around you; I could feel it in the extraordinary sense while walking the streets of the mystical city of Tzfat (where mystics have thought the Messiah will begin his journey to Jerusalem for the final redemption) and in the very ordinary experience of eating in a falafel restaurant. But I didn't just feel it — I became part of it and it became a part of me.

Being Jewish in Israel is a homecoming. I never felt like an outsider or a visitor — I belonged. Everywhere we went allowed me to connect to my Judaism in ways I never imagined. Celebrating the Sabbath in the Jewish state was unlike any experience I had before. The entire country came to a near halt. Shops and restaurants closed down, and people took time to relax. I feel truly blessed to have been able to experience in Jerusalem this holy day I so regularly take for granted.

Jerusalem truly held the most highlights for me in my birthright experience. The history of Judaism comes alive there; nowhere is that more evident than in front of the Kotel.

I felt a connection to my

Judaism that was unlike anything I have ever experienced. Standing where so many of my people have stood, hoped, and prayed for centuries awakened parts of me I never knew existed. I saw the tiny scrolls of paper stuck between the cracks that contained the most intimate and deepest desires of the visitors who have come and gone before me, and I stuck mine in next to them. Doing so, I felt as though I became a part of the history of the Wall and a part of Jewish history.

While Jerusalem connected me to Jewish history, Nahariya connected me to contemporary Jewish life in Israel. Walking along the boardwalk and beaches of this popular tourist attraction, we felt an incredibly vibrant energy as we participated in Israeli folk dancing and



Jennifer Lava applied to birthright israel twice before being accepted.

even some decidedly "international" dancing in a local club.

The people I met on my journey through this amazing country will be lifelong friends. I will never forget a single person I traveled with from America or the six Israeli soldiers who joined our group in Jerusalem. For 10 spectacular days I got up early with these people and boarded the bus to experience all that this amazing place has to offer. We hiked Masada together, floated in the Dead Sea together, and experienced the joy of entering Jerusalem for the first time together. We are bonded together by our Judaism and the shared love for Israel that grew out of this experience.

When I returned to the States, I was happy to see my friends and family. I was excited to have familiar foods and hear a familiar language. However, I was also struck by a painful homesickness. I connected with Israel in such a meaningful way that part of me remains there. This may have been my first trip to Israel, but it will not be my last.

Jennifer Lava, 22, of West Orange is a student at Hofstra University.

JERRY WALDOR INSTITUTE FUNDRAISING SYMPOSIUM

UJC MetroWest, your Center for Jewish Philanthropy, is offering a fundraising symposium to staff and lay leadership of Jewish organizations in the MetroWest community.

Session topics may include:

- Face to Face Solicitation
- Getting the Appointment
- Handling Objections
- Having a Jewish Conversation
- First Meeting Checklist
- Donor Research

Please join us for one of the following sessions:

**Thursday,
September 6, 2007**

Location: Adath Shalom
841 Mountain Way
Morris Plains

Chaired by: Jeri Kimowitz

**Wednesday,
September 19, 2007**

Location: JCC MetroWest
760 Northfield Ave.
West Orange

Chaired by: Rande Rubenstein

**Tuesday,
October 9, 2007**

Location: Temple Beth Ahm
60 Temple Way
Springfield

Chaired by: Peter Waldor

The Jerry Waldor Institute (JWI) was conceived as a memorial to Jerry Waldor, a man of vision and skill who was a tremendous leadership force for the Jewish community. Among his many and varied roles in the Jewish community, Jerry was a past president of United Jewish Federation of MetroWest; a former UJA Campaign chair, the first chair of the Lester Society, and an Achim co-chair. His friends and family created JWI to train future leaders to be as committed, as selfless, and as effective as he was in the Jewish community.

Each session will begin at 6:30 p.m. with a light dinner. Training will begin promptly at 7 p.m. Space is limited to 25 participants per session.

UJC is pleased to offer this symposium at no cost but registration is required.

To register, please go to www.ujcnj.org/leadership

Please share this with others who you think will benefit from this symposium.

For more information, contact UJC MetroWest at (973) 929-3043 or leadership@ujcnj.org



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