

# Can't we all just get along

## *Working across denominations within the Jewish community*

STORY BY LORIE RAILEANU • PHOTOS BY KRISTI FOSTER

If the heads of Yeshiva University, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion can get together during the most recent United Jewish Communities General Assembly to discuss the next generation, can't St. Louisans see beyond the walls of our own synagogues, temples, and *shuls* and work together to come up with a plan to ensure the continuation of Judaism among our own community's Jews? As a group, "Why can't we," in the words of Rodney King, "all just get along?"

If only it were that simple.

While there have been efforts made to include representatives from all denominations on community-wide projects, the most impact can be felt in the subtle grassroots activities of groups like the Jewish Student Union (JSU), the Women's Intra-Community Dialogue Group sponsored by the Jewish Community Relations Council and Nishmah, and Student-to-Student, also sponsored by the JCRC. All groups cross denominational borders to bring youth and women together to celebrate their Judaism.

Rabbi Michael Rovinsky, the Saint Louis Director of the JSU, is a pied piper of sorts, bringing unique programming to high school students from West County to Clayton. And, aside from the great snacks and free pizza he provides to students at JSU meetings, kids get together with other Jewish kids ... get this ... voluntarily.

"This isn't Hebrew School," says Rovinsky. "Everyone who comes does so on their own, without any strings attached."

Participation varies from month to month, but in all there are more than 300 high school students tak-



ing part in the St. Louis JSU. Meetings take place on campus (with the exception of Clayton High School, which meets at Starbucks) and alternate by days of the week.

“It’s not a social club,” says Rovinsky. “Kids from disparate backgrounds get together and discuss topics as varied and serious as body piercing, Halloween observance, recreational drug use, and music.”

The kids themselves decide what each session’s topic will be, and Rovinsky builds the program around it. Inevitably, the question of how these topics affect them as Jews comes up, “and that’s what makes it different from other clubs and groups on campus,” observes Alice Fasman, the JSU adviser for Clayton High School and wife of Rabbi Mark Fasman of Shaare Zedek Synagogue.

“It’s so nice that there’s a Jewish choice for kids in high school whose peers are involved in so many different clubs —

some secular, some not. As a minority, it can be difficult to find a place where you belong.” Rovinsky feels participation is critical. “If kids get involved on their own in high school, statistics show they will stay involved in college, marry Jewish, and remain actively Jewish throughout their adult lives.”

Parent and community support for the JSU in St. Louis is strong. Rabbis from every denomination have participated in programs, including Rabbi Susan Talve (Central Reform Congregation), Rabbi Jeffrey Bienenfeld (formerly of Young Israel), Rabbi Mark Fasman (Shaare Zedek), and Rabbi Randy Fleisher (Central Reform Congregation) to name a few.

“The JSU grows every year,” says Rovinsky “thanks to the support of grants from the Simon Foundation, Lubin-Green Foundation, Through A Child’s Eyes Foundation, private local donors and generous gifts from individuals as far away as

**ABOVE**

**Rabbi Michael Rovinsky, director of the Jewish Student Union in St. Louis, works on a project with Daniel Iken of Clayton High School, Samantha Sabol of Parkway North, Joe Weil of Ladue High School and Andrew Israel of Parkway North High School.**



**ABOVE**

**Ronit Sherwin, executive director of Nishmah, which hosts the Women's Intra-Community Dialogue Group. Sherwin says the group tries 'to roll up our sleeves, open our minds, and learn from one another for the sake of our shared community in St. Louis.'**

California and New York.”

Fast forward 20 years and you have the Saint Louis Women's Intra-Community Dialogue group, rekindled by the JCRC and Nishmah. While high school is well behind them, as are college and getting married, serious issues remain in their lives, in the world, and within the community. The group meets monthly to share experiences, observances, and opinions with the goal of building bridges between them.

“Women have this natural maternal desire for resolution and peace,” said Ronit Sherwin, executive director of Nishmah. “We seek out ways to work together, to find common ground in the things we hold important.”

Joining the Intra-Community Dialogue group requires an application and serious commitment. The group has a professional facilitator, adheres to a strict calendar, and has an overriding agenda: “to roll up

our sleeves, open our minds, and learn from one another for the sake of our shared community in St. Louis,” Sherwin said. One of the special aspects of the group is that its membership and discussions remain confidential.

The participants of the dialogue group may represent a small minority of those interested in listening to the opinions of others with differing views. However, their hope is that each will foster and personally disseminate a deeper level of understanding among their friends and respective denominational communities. There is enough misunderstanding of Jewish views by non-Jews, so why should we perpetuate misunderstanding among ourselves?

The Jewish Community Center's Women's Shabbat Retreat is another example of multi-denominational participation. “For one Shabbat in February, we gather together and celebrate ourselves

with other women. We spend a full 25 hours challenging intellectually, culturally, physically and emotionally in a safe, Jewish environment. It's fantastic!" adds Sherwin.

At the end of the day, these women have many things in common: They are sisters, mothers, wives, grandmothers and, most importantly, Jews. Still, tearing down the denominational walls for one Shabbat is easy. Learning to appreciate and embrace differences is what is more difficult.

The Student-to-Student program sponsored by the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) is another group in which members represent a wide spectrum of the Jewish community. The group, with 118 participants this year, reaches beyond its own to bring Jewish awareness and education to non-Jewish high school students throughout the city. High school juniors and seniors voluntarily speak to their peers throughout St. Louis about Judaism with the goal of imparting information, fostering understanding, and

countering stereotypes. According to the executive director of the JCRC, Batya Abramson-Goldstein, "the program has been widely successful as a tool for building bridges with our non-Jewish neighbors. It's also gone a long way towards building inter-denominational understanding and relationships between the kids participating in the program." Abramson-Goldstein is very proud of the work the kids have done and the life-long friendships they have forged.

It's up to the rest of us to make sure that student-to-student, friend-to-friend, colleague-to-colleague, and neighbor-to-neighbor, we make every attempt to remember our shared past in order to build a stronger and more understanding future.

■ *Lorie Raileanu is a local freelance writer and the publisher of Jewish Current Events, a bi-weekly newspaper distributed to middle-school students around the country. She also manages the marketing function for the local agency, Creative Producers Group, and is married to Michael Raileanu, the Judaica Principal at Solomon Schechter Day School. Lorie is the mother of four beautiful and talented children: Gabriella, Phoebe, Atara, and Maccabee. She was born and raised in Los Angeles, CA.*

## BELOW

**Women take part in the Women's Shabbat Retreat in February 2007, held by the Jewish Community Center. The annual retreat is an opportunity for women from all branches of Judaism to come together for a spiritual gathering.**

