

Melissa Gerr (Host) ([00:01](#)):

You're listening to Pull Up A Chair, stories from 100 years of creating community in Jewish Baltimore, a podcast created by The Associated: Jewish Federation of Baltimore.

Paul Lurie ([00:13](#)):

First year, we won gold medal. Our second year, we didn't win a single game and we had the best time. We had an amazing experience.

Melissa Gerr (Host) ([00:26](#)):

Welcome back to Pull Up a Chair. I'm your host, Melissa Gerr. Each month, we explore a different theme that illustrates how, for more than 100 years and counting, The Associated: Jewish Federation of Baltimore has been a place to turn to in times of struggle or celebration and for assistance in connection. You'll probably hear some familiar voices as we laugh, reminisce and learn a thing or two about what it means to build and be a part of a strong Jewish community. For this episode, we meet Paul Lurie, chief operating officer for the Jewish Community Centers in Park Heights and Owings Mills, agencies of The Associated. He rose to that position by way of his work in the JCC Maccabi Games. The Maccabi Games have offered a life and personality shaping experience to Jewish teens since 1982. About 6,000 teens from around the world, participate in this five-day Olympic style sporting event held each summer in several north American cities. Beyond athletic competition, the games promote community involvement, teamwork and cultivate a deep connection with Jewish pride. Paul started out with Maccabi coaching, baseball and inline hockey. Then he oversaw the Maccabi program at the JCC for more than a decade, which included being at the helm when Baltimore hosted the games in 2007 and the combined Games and Arts Fest in 2010. But Paul was just a teenager when his trajectory into the world of Maccabi sports launched like a story that only Hollywood dreams are made of.

Paul Lurie ([02:02](#)):

So I got involved in Maccabi when I was 14 years old. I was playing on a summer travel baseball team in Reisterstown and a bunch of kids on my team were also Jewish and were playing on the JCC Maccabi team from Baltimore that summer and about a week and a half before they left to go to their tournament in Houston, one of the kids on our travel team hurt himself and he was playing on the Maccabi team and wasn't able to go. So they were looking for a replacement player and the kids on my team knew I was Jewish and went to the coach and said, 'We have somebody that might be able to fill in.' And a week before we went, I signed up and then I flew to Houston with the team and played in 1995 in the JCC Maccabi Games in Houston.

Melissa Gerr (Host) ([02:38](#)):

Though, he'd been playing baseball for years, he says his Maccabi experience went way beyond sports and connected him to Judaism in a surprising way.

Paul Lurie ([02:48](#)):

It was a really awesome experience. I had a great time. A, I was with a lot of my friends from Baltimore, who I knew already, but it was in a different setting and a different context. JCC Maccabi obviously is a fully Jewish event. So being in Houston, Texas with 3000 Jewish teens, participating in all different kinds of sports, playing baseball teams from Houston, from California, from Florida, from all over the United States being in their opening ceremonies with 5-6,000 people singing Hatikvah together, it was a really magical and different experience than I had really been a part of before. We also won the gold medal,

which didn't hurt from a sports standpoint to be a part of that. And it was just a really awesome time to, to get to know them in a different context in terms of my friends to meet other people from other cities. And one of the unique parts of Maccabi is home hospitality. So we actually stay with a family in the community for the week. So I got to stay with another Jewish family meet their kids, they had kids my age. I still talked to them a couple of years ago kind of keep in touch when we can. So it's just a really different experience than any other baseball tournament I had been in at any other kind of group gathering.

Melissa Gerr (Host) ([03:52](#)):

Maccabi has evolved to stay relevant with teens and what interests them.

Paul Lurie ([03:56](#)):

It's boys and girls co-ed, and there's baseball, basketball, soccer, volleyball, swimming, tennis, table-tennis. Recently, they've added in lacrosse. They've added in this year, chess is coming in, e-sports is coming in. So there's a lot of different new sports. We always look at what's kind of different types of things that teens are engaged in and about, now 15 years ago, 10 years ago arts was added in as a completely separate component for people who aren't interested in athletics, but still want the Maccabi experience. There's now an arts track where you can do musical theater and acting improv and culinary and all different kinds of artistic endeavors.

Melissa Gerr (Host) ([04:33](#)):

Teamwork, competition and personal accomplishment are all part of the Maccabi games, but it also provides a powerful gateway to help young people cultivate a Jewish identity.

Paul Lurie ([04:44](#)):

One of our founding organizations that turned into us was the JEA the Jewish Education Alliance. And you look back, we have a JEA history room in our Park Heights JCC. And you look back at their sports clubs and their sports teams, and there's a lot of synergy in terms of what they did 90, 80, 70 years ago, and what Maccabi does today. And I always think it's interesting that sports is an avenue to get Jewish people together. It's not the end all be all. It can be just a basketball game, but if you can do a basketball game in a way where everybody there is Jewish or there's some other element that brings Jewish identity building into it, like in Maccabi with the social and the community service and the Israeli and everything else, it's an avenue to get to Jewish identity. And I think the JEA did that, you know, 70, 80 years ago. And Maccabi does that today,

Melissa Gerr (Host) ([05:28](#)):

Even after decades of involvement, Paul says there are some memories that still really stand out.

Paul Lurie ([05:34](#)):

The first opening ceremonies being in an arena where the whole arena is standing up, singing Hatikvah is just not something that I had ever thought about or been a part of before. You go to games all the time and they sing the National Anthem, but to sing Israeli National Anthem, where everybody in the place is Jewish, and is a part of that experience was kind of goosebumpy and very transformative for me personally. The next one I remember really strongly is the following year. So the first year we won gold medal. Our second year we didn't win a single game. And we had the best time we had an amazing experience. And just the fact that you could go to this type of event and have such a strong experience

without being athletically a strong experience was really eye-opening to me, that's, there's so much that goes on in this week between the social events and meeting all these people, getting to know your own team, the community service that, you know, the week is more than sports.

Melissa Gerr (Host) ([06:27](#)):

Maccabi provides this unique opportunity for teens, but adults are involved too.

Paul Lurie ([06:33](#)):

We have a lot of people over the years, I've been involved who have come through the program as athletes or artists who have gotten back involved as coaches and mentors afterwards. And that's when you can really see what it meant to them is that they went through this program and got so much out of it that they wanted to come back and give it back to the next generation. We have staff people that work here that were involved in the program. We have lay people on our board at The Associated, other people who came to the program, and everybody talks about it as a positive experience in their life. And the ability to come back to the next generation and say, 'This affected me in a way, and I want to help you get that same experience out of it.' And then it's a really unique opportunity to bring the community together between the host families that are needed when we host the hundreds of families that come out, who- some are parents to have kids go through the program, some are parents of preschoolers that want their kids to get that experience.

Paul Lurie ([07:22](#)):

And some are people who are now empty-nesters that want to be a part of the program again. So bringing these hundreds of families together, it takes about a thousand volunteers to pull off the week. So getting people from the community to come in and volunteer their time to serve lunch, or to keep score for a basketball game or whatever it might be. And then just the community collaboration with synagogues and with other Jewish communal organizations, it really, it takes a village in this case to really run an amazing experience like that. And when we host, we're fortunate with the leadership of the associated, but with the community as a whole, to be able to come together and pull this off.

Melissa Gerr (Host) ([07:56](#)):

It takes a village to pull off hosting the Maccabi games or to send Jewish teens around the country to participate. The Associated is committed to doing its part to make all of that happen.

Paul Lurie ([08:07](#)):

In the years that we host, we literally could not do it without them. The community resources, the infrastructure involved in bringing thousands of teams to Baltimore and putting on this amazing program their support from an operational, from a financial, from a community planning. It's just not possible without them. In the years where we traveled, The Associated is just a big supporter of the program. And every time a team does a Jewish experience or does something with other Jews, I think it helps them to identify who they are as a Jewish person and it helps them as they continue to grow in their lives.

Melissa Gerr (Host) ([08:41](#)):

Thanks for listening to Pull Up A Chair. I'm your host Melissa Gerr. This podcast was produced for you by The Associated: Jewish Federation of Baltimore. From East Baltimore to Forest Park, from Pikesville to Randallstown and beyond, The Associated has been there for the community every step of the way.



Don't miss the next episode with more stories from your friends and neighbors in Baltimore's Jewish community. Thanks for listening. You've been listening to Pull Up a Chair, stories from 100 years of creating community and Jewish Baltimore. It's part of The Associated's Centennial Celebration.