

Melissa:

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.

Jen:

It's one of my favorite things that I do to this day is connect people to meaningful volunteer experiences that help root them in this community.

Melissa:

Welcome back to *Pull Up A Chair*. Each month, The Associated Jewish Federation of Baltimore shines a light on your neighbors and friends illustrating what it means to build and be a part of a strong Jewish community. I'm your host Melissa Gerr. In this episode, what connects us to community? For Baltimore transplant Jen Grossman, connection comes through service. Jen has been deeply involved in volunteering and served multiple years as chair of the Jewish Volunteer Connection, an agency of The Associated. But her arrival in Baltimore had a rocky start.

Jen:

When I first moved here, I had no children. I had no means to meet people. And it was, it was a really rough transition. I was finding that people were established. They had their friends and really weren't looking for new friends. You know, I loved my job, but that was it. And I was, I really wasn't meeting young people where I was working. And, once I got involved in Jewish Volunteer Connection, I began to meet people that I was able to by extension, you know, have meaningful relationships with. And I had so many life transitions during my years there. And so volunteering really gave me a vehicle to meet people that were either in the same life stage as I was or had the same, like interest.

Melissa:

Overseeing Mitzvah Day was one of Jen's first tasks with the Jewish Volunteer Connection. It happened and still happens each Christmas day. Hundreds of volunteers come together to give back to the community.

Jen:

Some of the hands-on onsite projects that were part of Mitzva Day and still are, was many people cooked holiday dinners and in their own home, homemade turkeys, homemade sides, desserts, and served them in smaller shelters. So, you know, we had always served in larger shelters, but we were able to secure partnerships where we would go into just a small women's shelter and actually serve it and engage with the residents. We would go around and you know, schedule it before, but winterize clients' homes. And so people that had, you know, ice on their driveway, leaves on their lawns, their windows needed to be winterized that day. We would have volunteers go in and winterize homes.

Melissa:

2007 was Jen's first year at the helm of Mitzvah Day. And it came off without a hitch. But then...

Jen:

My second year chairing Mitzvah Day was 2008, which we all know was a major change in the economy. And one of the things that The Associated did in order to meet the needs was decrease our budget for

Mitzvah Day. And, you know, pretty quickly, you know, JVC was amazing at pivoting before pivot was a word, and we began to look to community partners to have things donated. So typically prior to 2008, we would go to Sam's club and we would buy 500 bottles of water or we would go to Kohl's and we would buy socks. So when 2008 happened, we didn't have that kind of disposable budget to go out and buy those things. But we knew that these bags are more important than ever, and almost a hundred percent of the items that year were donated. And we were able to do it on a zero budget.

Melissa:

The practice of community partnerships is still integral to Mitzvah Day. And those partnerships and the volunteer opportunities have grown.

Jen:

I had the opportunity over the course of my three years as chair and my three years as chair of the Jewish Volunteer Connection to grow it. And by, you know, the mid of my cycle of being at Jewish Volunteer Connection, the event got so big that we needed to divide it into two rooms and one room making the bags. In the other room with partnerships of organizations that we relied on in 2008 and other community partnerships that were able to come. We called it the room where people could come and do tangible projects that were then delivered to those organizations. And the first couple years it was Associated programs. And then it grew into community programs. And some of the feedback that we had heard from the community was that we didn't realize the reach of The Associated. We didn't realize that they didn't just serve Jewish recipients. And from that day MLK day was born and we began to do Good Deeds Day. And one of the things that we had heard over and over again, why they continued to volunteer was that it was a family affair. There was nothing that you couldn't do to bring your children to. And that from a very young age, we were offering the experience to engage children and learn from very young age, that volunteering wasn't just something we did on Christmas day, but it was our responsibility.

Melissa:

Jen's involvement with the Jewish Volunteer Connection provided many heartwarming memories. But there's one that stands out.

Jen:

My fondest memory really is my brother and my nephews would come down every year from New York and would spend the holiday solely so they could be part of Mitzvah Day. And I remember probably the second year they were here, part of Mitzvah Day grew to be not just making the bags, but to delivering the bags as well. And I remember the streets being empty. It was Christmas morning, it was freezing cold. And just seeing the streets begin to get filled with people, holding our bags, that had tags on it. And I remember my nephew at the time who was really young saying, Aunt Jen, look, they're opening the bag. And he reached in. And the first thing they took out was the card and read the card. And I just couldn't believe that of all the things that were in there, what really mattered most was that somebody cared about them, that somebody took the time to not only assemble the bag, but also let them know that they were thinking of them and wishing them a happy holiday season.

Melissa:

Jen is still involved in JVC, but she hasn't held a leadership position for years, but the foundation she built while giving back and connecting to the greater Baltimore Jewish community, still undergirds all that she does.

Jen:

All the time. I mean, I can't quantify, but all the time, people are still calling me and saying, I'm looking for a meaningful way to get involved in the community. Can you help me? And it just, it just speaks to how my initial years here in Baltimore, when my goal was to really establish who I was and what my purpose was, continues on. Just the other day, I was introduced to a young woman who was new to the community. And, you know, I saw myself in her. And the first thing I said to her was, you know, you should find a way to volunteer. It was, it was a lifeline for me. And to this day, I still feel like that connection piece of Jewish Volunteer Connection is still deeply rooted in who I am. And it's one of my favorite things that I do to this day is connect people to meaningful volunteer experiences that help root them in this community.

Melissa:

Thanks for listening to The Associated podcast, *Pull Up A Chair*. I'm your host, Melissa Gerr. Each month we bring you stories from Baltimore's vibrant Jewish community. *Pull Up A Chair* is available on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. You can also find us on The Associated website. Look for [associated.org/pull up a chair](https://associated.org/pull-up-a-chair), remember to subscribe and rate or review. It really helps others find us and tell your friends and family. You've been listening to *Pull Up A Chair* - stories from 100 years of creating community in Jewish, Baltimore. It's part of The Associated Centennial celebration.