

# INSIDE JOI

Transforming Lives, Transforming Communities

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## Program Helps Grandparents Nurture Jewishness of Interfaith Grandkids

**By Sue Fishoff**

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Bettina Kurowski is the chair of the 2008 fund-raising campaign of the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles and active in her Conservative synagogue.

She's also a grandmother of three young grandchildren. They give her great "naches," or joy, she says, but she's also worried—the children's father is not Jewish, the kids are being raised in an interfaith home and Kurowski, for all her Jewish involvement, is not sure what role she should play in passing on the Jewish heritage that is so dear to her.

"My husband and I are the keepers of the Jewish tradition, the culture and values of Judaism—what it really means to be a Jew," Kurowski says. "I took it upon myself to study how to be the best grandparent I could be while acknowledging the non-Jewish side of their family.

"I didn't want to give the children the sense that there's something wrong with people who are not Jewish, but I still want to give them a sense of pride in being Jewish. It's a fine line."

Looking around, Kurowski found few resources for grandparents like herself. She says she's the only one in her circle of friends whose children intermarried, and she felt the need to share her concerns with others in her situation.

This week, she'll get that chance when the Grandparents Circle holds its first meeting at Valley Beth Shalom, Kurowski's congregation in Encino, Calif.

The Grandparents Circle, which launches its pilot course Jan. 8 in Los Angeles, is a new program created by the Jewish Outreach Institute to help grandparents present their Jewish heritage to their grandchildren in intermarried households.

Grandparents meet in groups of 20 to 25 for five weeks of guided discussion, share their concerns and learn specific skills for passing on Jewish history and tradition without forcing it on the children.

"They want to pass on their Jewish identity and background, they want to

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# What is Grandparents Circle?



**The Grandparents Circle** is a much needed education and networking program for Jewish grandparents whose adult children have intermarried. These grandparents often feel unsure of how they can cultivate the Jewish identities of their grandchildren, especially when it is not always clear as to whether or not those children are being raised as Jews. **The Grandparents Circle** is a comprehensive program that offers grandparents skills and techniques to nurture, and in some cases help establish, their interfaith grandchildren's Jewish identities. It also provides participants with a supportive and open-minded environment to share their achievements, express their concerns, and acknowledge their challenges.

Grandparents can participate in the program through an in-person course and/or an interactive listserve and/or events for grandparents and their families:

- **Grandparents Circle The Course** is a six session course for Jewish grandparents whose grandchildren are being raised in interfaith homes. It provides participants with skills and techniques to enable them to share Judaism with their grandchildren in an interesting and engaging way and creates a supportive and understanding community of peers for participants.
- **The National Grandparents Circle Listserve** is a virtual conversation held via an email discussion list that enables Jewish grandparents from across North America who seek to nurture Jewish identity in their interfaith grandchildren to share their experiences with others who are in the same circumstances. The listserve allows for communication between current course participants, course alumni and grandparents who have not yet taken the course or who live in a city without an available course.
- **Family-Friendly Events for Grandparents and their Grandchildren** are a wide variety of one-time programs supplementing the course that involve the grandparents and their grandchildren, often involving their adult children and their spouses/partners and

sometimes are open to the entire community. These events often take place during or close to Jewish holidays and during school breaks when grandchildren might be visiting their grandparents.

*The Grandparents Circle pilot program was made possible through the generous support of Bettina Kurowski and Dennis Rose and the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles Valley Alliance. It was piloted at Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California.*



## Excerpt from the book "Twenty Things for Grandparents of Interfaith Grandchildren to Do"

by Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky and Paul Golin  
Published by Torah Aura Productions  
([www.TorahAura.com](http://www.TorahAura.com)) in 2007

Because of the increasingly antiquated stigma of intermarriage as marrying *out* of Judaism and therefore "betraying" the Jewish community, some people are embarrassed to publicly acknowledge that their children have intermarried. They may be afraid of the social backlash among their friends. If they are active synagogue members or involved in the local Jewish federation, they may be reticent to admit that such activity did not positively impact on the Jewish identity of their adult children, an identity which they gauge strictly – and incorrectly – by the barometer of whether or not their children have married someone who was not raised in the Jewish community. Besides recognizing that interfaith marriage is more an accident of demography and not necessarily a reflection of Jewish identity (we meet someone at school, at work, or in social contexts, and we fall in love), it is important to recognize that interfaith marriage only undermines one's Jewish identity *if* the Jewish community does not allow the individual to exercise it fully. So don't permit the way that segments of the organized Jewish community interpret the decisions your children have made to shape your own Jewish identity. In order to help nurture the Jewish identity of your grandchildren, it is essential that you wear your own

Jewish identity especially proudly at this time in your life. You may want to begin simply by wearing a Star of David or hai necklace. For some, this may seem trite and inconsequential, but it quietly represents a public display of Judaism, Jewish allegiance and Jewish identity. It unabashedly tells people – including your grandchildren – who you are and where you see yourself in relation to the rest of the world. Moreover, it might be something that they will eventually want to wear because it is yours.

Just about everyone loves to travel, especially if they aren't able to do so frequently. Visiting new places and sites of interest, including new restaurants and hotels, provides experiences that stay with us forever. You might not remember what you ate for breakfast this morning, but you'll never forget the crêpes they served on your hotel balcony in Paris twenty years ago. This is particularly the case with kids. Because travel experiences form such vivid memories, Jewish experiences when you travel enjoy an entirely different space in the minds of children. We encourage you to take your grandchildren traveling, with or without their parents—even if the travel is a short distance and doesn't include an overnight.

The Jewish people have lived in nearly every part of the world, so it's usually possible to tie the site you're visiting to something Jewish, whether you're in Chicago or China. Destinations that still contain vibrant Jewish communities provide the opportunity for you to demonstrate the connection you feel with global Jewry. ■

## How do I start a local Grandparents Circle?

If you are interested in bringing Grandparents Circle to your community, or if you know anyone who would like to sign up for our free listserv, please contact Grandparents Circle National Coordinator **Liz Marcovitz** at [LMarcovitz@JOI.org](mailto:LMarcovitz@JOI.org) or 212.760.1440.

She will send you more information on how to initiate this exciting program!

## Bringing the Grandparents Circle to Hartford, CT

By **Laura Kinyon**



Last Fall, I was fortunate enough to attend the JOI annual conference in Washington DC, where I learned a bit about the new Grandparents Circle. This idea excited me, of course, as it offered an opportunity to meet a growing need in my community of Avon, Connecticut. Social Worker that I am, when you combine that piece of offering support, along with strengthening the fabric of our Jewish Community, that's an inspired combination, one that touches me.

Once back in Connecticut, I brought the information about Grandparents Circle to the financial and programmatic decision-makers in our Jewish Federation, and was met with great response. There was serious interest and energy to bring the program to our area. A presentation was made to our Rabbinic Council (of all-denominational rabbis, who meet quarterly) to explore their level of interest. All were interested and encouraging.

I was then "offered the job" to be the Grandparents Circle facilitator. Since I was already the facilitator for the Mothers Circle, a support program for women of other religious backgrounds raising Jewish children, I had the experience of running these types of programs as well.

I am happy to say we now have five synagogues joining us as partners (3 Conservative and 2 Reform), and five *shuls* both announcing our program from the pulpit and including JOI and Grandparents Circle in their regular bulletins, hard copy, email, etc. Perhaps most importantly, we have twenty-two participants signed up and a waiting list for our session starting next fall. It's very exciting to watch the program grow right before my eyes, and I know this is only the beginning!

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share their history and who they are with their grandchildren, but it has to be done in a way that's interesting to the grandchildren," says Liz Marcovitz, a program officer at the institute. "You can't just start talking about Judaism with no context."

The course is inspired by "Twenty Things for Grandparents of Interfaith Grandchildren to Do," a 2007 JOI publication. When Kurowski read the book last year, she and her husband donated the funds to build a curriculum around it. Her federation has earmarked funds to run the pilot course, and Kurowski says it hopes to expand the course to other synagogues in the Los Angeles area.

Marcovitz says the Jewish communities of Chicago and Hartford, Conn., among others, are interested. Eventually the JOI plans to set up a national listserve for all such grandparents, whether they have taken the course or not.

Suzette Cohen is organizing the program in Atlanta. She notes that the city's Jewish community, which has a 60 percent intermarriage rate, is in its sixth year of running The Mothers Circle, a JOI support group for non-Jewish women raising Jewish children. Many of the Jewish parents of those intermarried couples have asked for a similar program for them.

"They often dance around the issue, afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing" and offending their child or the non-Jewish spouse, Cohen says.

The first Atlanta circle is already oversubscribed; a second group is filling quickly. The gist of the book and the course is to teach by example: Invite the grandchildren to Passover seders in your home, show them photos of your fami-



ly, light Shabbat candles and tell them why it's important to you. Build "layers of Jewish memories," the book suggests, that will remain with the children as they grow to adulthood.

Grandparents are an often overlooked influence on the lives of their grandchildren, says JOI's associate director, Paul Golin. The institute's extensive research on the adult children of intermarried couples found that one of the major influences on the religious identities of these young adults was their grandparents.

But it's not a straight shot. "It's not about parenting, it's about influence," Golin says. "It happens holistically. If the grandparents are just who they are and have contact with the grandkids, they'll have that influence.

"That's why we say, just be the best Jew you can be. You don't want to come across as a Hebrew school teacher."

The Grandparents Circle is designed for Jewish grandparents whose intermarried children are open to it. If the grandchildren are being raised exclusively Christian, Golin notes, it is a much more delicate matter.

That's the situation facing Rose Sowadsky, an Atlanta-area grandmother whose two grandchildren are being raised Methodist. The children "are aware" she is

Jewish—they were at her home Christmas Eve and saw she had no tree—but they have never asked her about it.

"They must have been well prompted at home," she supposes. Sowadsky does not expect to have any influence on her grandchildren's religious upbringing, but she signed up for the Grandparents Circle for moral support. "I want to see how others cope with it," she says. ■

## You can help

We believe "outreach" is about the organized community giving, not asking, so all JOI programming is free to participants. However, these programs still require resources. If you are already engaged in the Jewish community and consider it important to reach those on the periphery, we ask that you please support our work by making a financial contribution. Thank you for your generosity and commitment.

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1270 Broadway, Suite 609, New York, NY 10001.

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