

Why a Women’s Foundation?



JWF Past Chairs, Randie Levin, Carolyn Tisdale, Beverly Liss, Sharon Hart, Margot Halperin and Gail Danto. (Front row in feature photo at top of page left to right, Past Executive Director, Helen Katz (left) and Current Executive Director, Susan Cassels Kamin)

Nine Chairs in a Roundtable Discussion

Vivian Henoach, Editor myJewishDetroit

Celebrating 18 years of fundraising and grantmaking – serving the unmet needs of Jewish women, girls and their families – the Jewish Women’s Foundation (JWF) was established in August 1999 by the Jewish Federation and United Jewish Foundation of Metropolitan Detroit.

At first, the concept wasn’t an easy sell. “Our pitch was research that documented that women control most of the wealth in this country,” states Margot Halperin, JWF Founding Chair. “And yet, philanthropic decision-making continues to be in the hands of men – husbands, lawyers, accountants. Our mission was twofold: to identify and fund programs focusing on the specific and unique needs of women and girls, and to educate women about finance, grantmaking and community needs – giving women a voice in the decisions where their philanthropic dollars should go.”

Starting with 11 founding members and seed funds provided by a three-year operating grant of \$255,000 from the United Jewish Foundation, JWF has grown to 165 trustees and more than \$4 million in endowment assets under management. Since its inaugural grant cycle, JWF has provided \$3,003,109 in 230 grants to more than 70 Federation agencies, Jewish organizations, synagogues, charitable causes in the general community and programs in Israel.

Most foundations don’t reach out for new members. JWF continues to invite women to join their ranks with a minimum commitment of \$10,000, payable over five years. Every member has a voice on the board and every member gets a vote.

The women of JWF take pride in running the Foundation like a business and, in 18 years, nine extraordinary community leaders have taken the helm as Chair. Recently they gathered for a

roundtable discussion with *myJewishDetroit* to reflect on their personal journey in philanthropy and what they have collectively achieved as members of JWF.

Meet the JWF Chairs



JWF Past Chairs, Randie Levin, Carolyn Tisdale, Beverly Liss, Sharon Hart, Margot Halperin and Gail Danto.

Margot Halperin: Founding JWF Chair, 2001-2003; Board Member, Jewish Federation; Past Board Member, JVS, United Jewish Foundation, Yad Ezra.

Beverly Liss: JWF Chair, 2003-2005; incoming President, Jewish Federation; Past President Federation's Women's Philanthropy, Adat Shalom Synagogue; Board Member, Hillel Day School, The Jewish Fund, United Jewish Foundation.

Sharon Hart: JWF Chair, 2005-2007; Past President JCC, Adat Shalom Synagogue; Past Board Member, United Jewish Foundation, Yad Ezra, Tamarack Camps; Current Board Member, Jewish Federation, Detroit Friends of the Jewish Theological Seminary, JCC.

Lisa Lis: JWF Chair, 2007-2009; Officer, Jewish Federation; Past President, Federation's Women's Philanthropy; Board Member, The Jewish Fund, United Jewish Foundation, Mark-Lis Family Philanthropic Fund; Past Board Member, JVS and Tamarack Camps.

Trudi Wineman: JWF Chair 2009-2011, Past Board Member, Jewish Federation, United Jewish Foundation.

Carolyn Schwarz Tisdale: JWF Chair 2011-2013; Vice President, Hebrew Free Loan (HFL); Board Member, Federation's Women's Philanthropy, United Jewish Foundation, Tamarack Camps and Mazon; Past Board Member, BBYO, Jewish Federation and Temple Israel.

Randie Levin: JWF Chair 2013-2015; Board Member, HFL, Orchards Children's Services, NCJW; Past Board Member, Jewish Federation, United Jewish Foundation, JCC.

Gail Danto: JWF Chair 2015-2017; Executive Committee Member, Jewish Family Service; Board Member, Marvin I. and Betty Family Foundation, Jewish Hospice and Chaplaincy Network. Past Board Member, Jewish Federation.

Patti Phillips: JWF Chair, 2017-2019; Past President, MSU Hillel; Board Member, Jewish Federation; Prentis Family Support Foundation, Morris-Phillips Philanthropic Fund; Past Board Member, Temple Beth El, Jewish Family Service.

Also present: JWF Executive Directors, **Helen Katz** (1999-2013) and **Susan Cassels Kamin** (2013-present).



Current JWF Chair, Patti Phillips (center) with Past Chairs, left to right, Lisa Lis and Trudi Wineman.

myJewishDetroit: (To Founding Partners, Margot Halperin and Beverly Liss): Why a women’s foundation? What inspired you to start JWF?

Beverly Liss: I attended a meeting of National Women’s Philanthropy where I learned that the Federations in New York and Chicago had both just started a Jewish Women’s Foundation. It sounded to me like such an interesting, innovative and wonderful thing to do. I was President of the Women’s Department at the time, and Margot was on the Exec Committee. We started talking about it . . .

Margot Halperin: . . . and I agreed! It was an extraordinary opportunity to open new doors for women in philanthropy

Beverly: So, I asked Margot to be Chair.

Margot: Helen Katz was the Director of the Women’s Department – and with Helen on board with us, we were confident that we could make JWF happen. It certainly helped that Penny Blumenstein was the President of Federation at the time. (I’m not sure any of this would have happened without the backing of women who had so much passion for the idea.) Bobby Slatkin, the President of Foundation was also one of our true advocates.

Beverly: The Foundation gave us the seed money of \$255,000 (for three years).

Margot: But even before that had happened, I had secured our first gift. The Exec Committee of the Foundation called us in at the last minute to make our presentation, and I’ll never forget that meeting. We all ran in – through a downpour – soaking wet! All the men were sitting on one side of the table with their hands crossed, but I already had a commitment in my pocket which they didn’t know about. Milt Goldrath had committed \$100,000 specifically to JWF to

honor the memory of wife, Joan. Before she passed away, Joan had been looking to make an endowment for something that would be meaningful to her. When I mentioned our concept of Jewish Women’s Foundation to Milt, he started to cry, and made the commitment of a transgenerational gift in Joan’s name.

So, we had our very first endowment before we walked into the meeting, and one of the first questions that came up was “Why would you need a foundation? We have any number of philanthropic vehicles – all choices open to women.”

Beverly: We talked about the needs of Jewish women, the importance of philanthropy, understanding the process and the business of philanthropy. We explained how we could be a real vehicle to bring women into the building, into the Federation family.

Margot: We had decided that the Max. M. Fisher Federation Building was to be the place where we conduct all our meetings – not in people’s beautiful living rooms or country clubs. We were going to run like a business — raising money for Jewish women in our community and around the world. We were heard. We convinced them that we could raise the money. We made the point that Milt’s grant was meant for the JWF and nowhere else. And, of course, Penny was in 100%.

Beverly: Immediately we had a founding membership of nine women. Counting Margot and me — there was Teri Farber, Gale Halperin Kahn, Helen Katz, Deena Lockman, Susie Pappas, Rona Rones, Connie Ross, Cheryl Schanes and Sandra Schwartz.



1999: Founding Trustees of the Jewish Women’s Foundation of Metropolitan Detroit, who each announced a gift of \$10,000, are seated from left to right, Deena Lockman, Helen Katz, Sandra Schwartz, and Teri Farber. Top row: Cheryl Schanes. Gail Halperin Kahn, Beverly Liss, Margot Halperin and Susie Pappas. Not shown: Connie Ross, Rona Rones.

Helen Katz: We decided to take a year to learn how to run this new enterprise – how to write grants, how to conduct site visits, how to reach out to the community and invite women into our sphere with compelling educational programs.

Beverly: And the concept just snowballed.

myJewishDetroit: *Ok, let’s hear from the others around the table: What initially drew you to JWF?*

Sharon Hart: I joined because I had been in leadership roles in the organized Jewish community for more years than I can remember—and to be honest, I was looking for something new, fresh and a little different than what I had been doing. What appealed to me the most was that JWF was a democratic process – one person, one vote.

Lisa Lis: I was a “dutiful” daughter. From the start, my mother, Florine Mark, “insisted” that I join JWF. I don’t agree with *everything* she tells me to do, but in this case, I was thrilled to get involved.

Trudi Wineman: I had been active in Federation’s Junior Division (now NEXTGen) and always have been supportive of Women’s Philanthropy, but JWF is where I have placed my energies in recent years, because I feel it is so important for women to have a say where their philanthropic dollars are going. My friend, Gloria Colton, who joined JWF as a transgenerational member with her mother-in-law, invited me to a JWF program. She thought it would be “right up my alley.” And she was right. I attended a few more programs . . . and then joined.

Carolyn Tisdale: I moved back to Detroit from New York City in 1991 and did a few things with Federation, but never really found a home there. I learned about JWF from Lila Silverman, a friend of my parents. Though I didn’t have the wherewithal to make the financial commitment at that time, I joined a couple of years later and immediately felt a level of comfort. I love having a voice in such a proactive Jewish organization and that collectively I can do far more through JWF than I have the means to do individually.

Randie Levin: Having been on staff in the Planning Department at Federation, I knew about the Foundation and certainly knew about the needs of the community. In fact, I joined JWF while I was still working. I was JWF Treasurer when Trudi called to invite me for coffee. Well, before she even got the words out to ask me to serve as the Incoming JWF Chair, I nearly jumped out of my seat to say, ‘Yes!’

Gail Danto: As it happened, the timing was just incredible. I was looking for something to do in the Jewish community. My parents were in frail health and setting up a family foundation – and what did I know about grants and budgets and evaluating avenues of philanthropy? For me, the hands-experience JWF provided me was invaluable.

Patti Phillips: I didn’t have a history of Federation giving. JWF was literally my entry point. When my father passed away suddenly, I had to learn about our family support foundation fund. I walked into the Federation building to get some information. In the hallway, I just happened to run into a few women I knew coming out of a JWF meeting that had just adjourned. It was an easy sell – they practically recruited me on the spot.

myJewishDetroit: How has JWF changed over the years?

Lisa: We’ve grown! And we continue to build our potential in the funds we provide, in our number of trustees and the breadth of our interests and viewpoints. We’re a diverse group, but I think if we did a family tree, we would see how everyone in JWF is somehow connected to Federation and its partnership agencies.

Trudi: As we grow, we continue to improve our process.

Carolyn: We’re always tweaking the way we do things.

Helen: And we’re getting better each year as we go, learning from the ways the community is changing, and from the new trustees coming on board, voicing their desires. The way we work is really a very organic process.

To summarize: I would say that every single chairperson who has come on board, each in her own way, has enriched the entire group. What's particularly exciting to me about our organization is that we each have a voice – and not only that, we also *listen* to one another. That's how we've stayed nimble and willing to experiment.

myJewishDetroit: What have been some of your sweetest memories or proudest achievements?

Gail: One of my sweetest memories was last year's Women's Lighting the Way event with Dana Nessel – Detroit Attorney known for her defense of same-sex marriage. She blew everyone away. And the year before we hosted Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy, bringing to light her campaign to process untested rape kits. We have had such amazing programs that have been our food and our draw in the community.

Carolyn: One of the highlights for me was a film we brought to the community called *Misrepresentation* – an incredible documentary about how the media portrays women. We always seem to be ahead of the curve on issues.

Lisa: For me, one of our boldest moves was a grant to Friendship Circle for a program called "Welcome Back, Inmates." Jewish women in prison? No one else would touch a subject like that. I love that we seek and select organizations that no one else is providing funds for.

Carolyn: We started some transformative grants through Jewish Family Service — a campaign against domestic abuse. We gave them the seed money to start JCADA — the Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse.

Lisa: I'm very proud of that fact that we were in on the very beginning of the Coalition, and have been very active in sustaining that organization in combatting that problem.

Sharon: We've also held several outreach events with different hospitals on heart disease, breast cancer, eating disorders – exploring health issues that directly affect women. We attracted women who didn't know the first thing about the Jewish Women's Foundation- but were interested in the subject.

Patti: Our grants to Jewish Legal Service and Cancer Thrivers Network also come to mind.

Lisa: Talking about Cancer Thrivers – we can't talk JWF without mentioning Patti Nemer. She was a huge presence in our organization during her years at the JWF.

Beverly: Patti Nemer, of blessed memory, was an integral part of us from the beginning. She held the course for us, she challenged us and taught us.

Trudi: Patti had our spreadsheet in her head . . .

Margot: Patti was an accountant who liked to say to us, "I can make the numbers dance before your eyes." And she did!

Randie: For me, one of the many highpoints of my experience with JWF has been the women we've had the opportunity to meet. They have been incredible leaders in our agencies, and through our work, we have been able to provide them entrée into the resources of our entire community. I think that the women who are a part of the JWF know more about our community than most people.

Sharon: I would say of all the organizations I've been a part of in the community, I've enjoyed this one the most. JWF has enriched my life.

Susan: I think every grant we make – makes a great impact in more ways than we'll ever know. For me, one of the most rewarding things to come from JWF is empowering women to do the work they love to do, all the while enjoying the process.

Beverly: I'm sitting here with a big smile on my face and the warmest feeling inside because to have seen this project from the beginning to what it's become today, and to know that women today are still energized and inspired, and still want to make grants with a Jewish and feminist lens – really validates what we've been doing for 18 years. **What a journey it's been!**