A hidden Jewish gem in the Midwest

"You are going where?" was the question asked time and again when I said I was leading a WCJCC delegation from five countries to the JCC of Milwaukee. While not as exotic as some of our recent travel destinations, we found a JCC that exemplifies community building and Jewish education at its best. At the conclusion of three intensive days we learned a thing or two on how to do things right:

- **A strong Jewish core** - While Milwaukee's JCC is similar to many North American JCC with 40% of the members not Jewish, the Jewish vision and mission of the JCC is apparent in every department and in almost every program. Two full-time senior Jewish educators- Jody Hirsh and Rabbi Shari Shamah- infuse the J in the JCC in so many different ways. From the common Kabbalat Shabbat services and adult Jewish education classes to a more creative Artists’ Lab, funded by a grant from the Covenant Foundation, which studies "wandering" as a Jewish theme or rabbinic quotations engraved across the pool and gym. This is augmented with a strong focus on Israel education in partnership with the Milwaukee Jewish Federation, boasting an established tradition of hiring Shilichim, an active “Partnership Together” with the Sovev Kinneret Region and hosting two young emissaries as well. No wonder they scored number one in a recent JCCA benchmarking national survey on the Jewish impact of the JCC.

- **Bridge building** - For the dynamic duo of Mark Shapiro, the Executive Director, and Moshe Katz, the President, a seamless community is not an empty slogan. They are actively seeking partnerships with a myriad of institutions. From daily cooperation with the nearby Milwaukee Jewish Day School to providing a home for the cancer support club, Gilda's House, that lost its premises during a flood.

- **Tikun Olam** - One does not necessarily have to travel to Africa in order to provide meaningful assistance to those in need. A remarkable Jewish Community Food Pantry provides meals to hundreds of local- mostly non Jewish-families on a regular basis. The spark in the eyes of the volunteers as they described their work and efforts for improving their service was so moving. We found out that some volunteers are former employees of the Jewish Community- what a great way to keep them involved.
Outreach- We saw firsthand an innovative way of implementing the “JCC without Walls” concept. A partnership with the nearby Bay Shore Town Center Mall resulted in "J Shore." A JCC store front at the mall which provides welcoming programs for visitors and a strong marketing presence. When we listened to Chris Jaeger, the manager of Bay Shore, speak about the joint venture, we could have sworn he was a trained Jewish communal worker.

Last but not least, the connection to World Jewry- Not many JCCs spell out in their mission statement their connection to world Jewry. Milwaukee does. Participating in WCJCC programs and conferences brings them closer to Jews in other countries. One vignette that illustrates this connection is “Tastes of Jewish Tradition.” A Jewish holidays recipe book that was written and produced by the JCC and later through WCJCC contacts translated into Russian by JDC and distributed to JCCs all across the FSU. Two of our delegates from Ukraine were pleasantly surprised to find out that this specific JCC was the source of a resource they use on a regular basis.

We were wrapped by the warmth and care of the hospitality, so many members, staff members and board members who are proud to be part of this endeavor. As we often seek sources of inspiration and models that can be emulated, my suggestion is to spend some time at the Harry and Rose Samson Family JCC of Milwaukee.

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