

The Power of Women in Philanthropy

by Ellie Kahn

"There's nobody involved in the ADL who is older than I," Leona Goldring said the other day. "Whether or not that is something to be proud of, I don't know!"

Leona Goldring is 93.

She not only attends monthly Anti-Defamation League (ADL) meetings, as well as planning sessions for their fundraising events, but she also is still active in the Women's Fundraising Division of United Jewish Fund (UJF). She was its chairperson about 40 years ago, and she still attends regular strategy meetings for former chairs.

In January 2001, Goldring received the Leah Rabin Award. "I almost dropped dead when I got the card," she recalled. "Why would they give a woman who is 93 an award like this? Why would they reach back to do that? And I thought there's only one reason. I represent the past. And I thought about how far we've come since my time."

I asked her how things have changed. "In those days," Goldring said, "the women's division was not the important arm of UJF it is today. Men decided how much a woman could give. A man made the major gift in the family and a pittance of that amount was allowed to his wife. It was a lot for a woman to give \$75. But some of us thought, if the women who were making these small donations were educated, they could do more."

The year Goldring was chairperson, that's just what happened. "Honey, it was beyond belief," she said. "We had a big, big luncheon at Louis B. Mayer's sister's house. Seventy-five women came, and each one paid \$500. You have no idea how colossal it was. From then on, we knew that the sky was the limit.

"People at that time didn't understand the power of women," she continued. "Increasingly, these women went to their husbands and said, 'I want to be a partner in the giving; we want the women's division to be a strong arm.' And that's how it gradually began. Throughout the years since my time, we have raised millions and millions of dollars."

It's easy to see how Goldring has been able to inspire and motivate people. "She comes to every ADL meeting to give her perspective on issues," said ADL regional director David Lehrer, who has known Goldring for more than 20 years. "I remember once when we were discussing church-state issues and prayer in school. Leona stood up and talked about being a 5-year-old in Niagara Falls. You could have heard a pin drop in the room. She spoke in such an impassioned way about what it was like to be ostracized in school because she was a Jew."

Goldring credits her parents with teaching her the values and commitment she brings to her activism. "My mother always had a pushke," she recalled. "I was taught from the very beginning that any penny, nickel, dime that I had went in there, because I had to be aware of our responsibility to our fellow men. My mother would bake and go up and down the street and offer food to people who had less than we."

What keeps Goldring going? "You have to be part of what is going on," she said. "Otherwise, you've lost dynamism, you have lost excitement, and you aren't able to even carry on a conversation. It's imperative that you keep track of what's going on in the world, no matter what age you are."

The violence she sees in the pages of her newspaper worries her every day. "When are we going to stop murdering each other?" she asked. "I am frightened by the fact that, no matter how hard we work, there's such intense hatred. But I don't concentrate on it in my own life. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here."

In addition to her numerous fundraising commitments and meetings, Goldring — who subscribes to the adage, "If you don't use it, you lose it!" — listens to computer radio shows. "I don't understand what they're saying, but I want to know the terminology," she said. She plays bridge with friends several afternoons a week, enjoys her nine great-grandchildren and eight grandchildren and dines with friends or with her daughter, Roberta Weintraub, former president of the Los Angeles school board. "I try not to go out more than three evenings a week," she told me. "Sometimes I forget that I'm old."

"Leona is a wonderful, committed, honest, delightful human being," Lehrer said. "We should all be like that at her age."

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