

# The Many Faces of the Jewish Federation

**Inna Manoim and Sharon Fargian recently shared their personal stories at the Jewish Federation's Lion of Judah and Pomegranate Society Luncheon. Inna was born in the Former Soviet Union and Sharon lived and worked in Israel. Their journeys show Federation at its best – as it was and as it will be. The Federation takes pride in these young women who are the faces of Federation and Jewish leadership in the 21st Century.**

## Inna's Story

Good afternoon, my name is Inna Manoim. If you didn't catch that, it's OK. I spend a good bit of time repeating and spelling my name. Typically, after such an exchange comes the question "where are you from?" I sometimes answer "Columbia, South Carolina" in hopes of keeping the conversation to a minimum. It never works and usually only serves to pique curiosity further. Inevitably, I end up delving into where I was born, how old I was when we immigrated, and why we left the Soviet Union. Many, who are not familiar with the Soviet Jewry movement, are often surprised and fascinated by my story. So, how does a girl named Inna come to be from Columbia, SC of all places?

Let's start at the real beginning: I was born in Belarus in 1975. At that time, Belarus was part of the Soviet Union, which was under communist rule. For the first few years of my life, I lived with my parents and extended family in a crowded two-bedroom apartment in the capital city of Minsk. Sometime after I was born, my parents began seriously contemplating emigration. As you probably know, life for most people in the Soviet Union was not easy, but for Jewish people in particular it was made even more difficult due to the strong culture of anti-Semitism which was and still is pervasive in that part of the world. Historically, Russia and other



*Inna with her family.*

eastern European countries had openly anti-Semitic policies and when Communism took hold, those policies continued to limit and oppress the Jewish people that lived within its reach.

In 1980, when I was just shy of five years of age, my parents were granted permission to emigrate from the U.S.S.R. By that time, many of the larger cities in the US were saturated with Soviet Jewish immigrants and the resources of the Jewish organizations that were helping newcomers were strained. Jewish federations in many smaller cities were willing and able to act as hosts for new immigrants. This is how a girl named Inna ended up in Columbia, South Carolina.

For my parents and grandparents, it was a culture shock for sure. At that time, Minsk was a bustling metropolis of just over a million people, whereas, the city of Columbia boasted a population of just over 100,000. My family

was able to escape the clutches of an oppressive regime and a society, which loathed them, based simply on their ancestry. In Columbia, outside of the small Jewish community, most people had never even met a Jew, and certainly not an immigrant from Russia. Columbia offered my family a new beginning and the promise of a future we never would have had in the Soviet Union.

None of this would have been possible without the leadership and generosity of a small Jewish Federation in the South. Our host family, the Bazermans, welcomed us and made sure we had what we needed to begin our new life. The Jewish Federation of Columbia generously provided us with a furnished apartment, as well as an interest-free loan to purchase our first car. Caring individuals from Federation gave my parents valuable lessons in the life skills necessary to navigate our new world. The personal and financial generosity of the Columbia Jewish Federation, much like the generosity of the Charlotte Jewish Federation during the Soviet resettlement in the 1970s and 1990s, made all the difference for my family, and other families like ours. They helped us get settled and begin a new life in this amazing country.

About three years after we landed in Columbia, my father

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## Sharon's Story

A friend of mine recently told me that I am a unicorn, her nickname for the rarity of meeting people who were born and raised here in Charlotte. We are unicorns. What, then, do we affectionately call the Jewish people my age who were born and raised in Charlotte? An even rarer phenomenon? There were maybe 50 of us in my preschool graduation. Have you seen the bustling preschool hallways today? It has been amazing to move back to Charlotte after years away to see that the small, but mighty, Jewish community that I grew up in has flourished into a thriving exuberant and impactful Jewish community led by the Federation. Thanks to all of your time, energy and generosity, I am thrilled that my daughter Eleanor will grow up here, be a part of it, and have a strong Jewish identity.

I grew up in a family that cares deeply about the Jewish community, both domestic and abroad. My parents took a leap of faith moving to the South nearly 40 years ago, and it is no surprise that the Jewish Federation of Charlotte played a huge role in my childhood and who I have become.

I was an LJCC rat for starters-swim team, soccer, basketball,



*Sharon and her family.*

pottery and summer camp (now Camp Mindy) to name a few of my favorite activities. I loved my Hebrew High classes (side note: for a while I even thought I might become a Rabbi), and really loved BBYO. I still keep up with some of my friends from BBYO, and just a few weeks ago had lunch with a friend of mine from Virginia who now lives in Charleston. It was pretty cool to take pictures of his nine month old son sitting with my Eleanor and see the next generation.

After graduating from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I worked for Hillel at the University of Virginia for one year because I knew that I wanted to give back to the community somehow. That year I staffed two Birthright trips, which was my 3rd cup of the Birthright "Kool-aid," and I knew that I had to spend

more time there. I knew that I needed to contribute to our Jewish family in Israel, and that I needed to find a Jewish husband in Israel because I knew I wasn't finding him here in Charlotte. I can confidently say that I succeeded in both.

All of my experiences in Charlotte led me to signing up for OTZMA, a one year volunteer program in Israel. Jewish Federations across America universally sponsor a portion of each participant's trip, just like the Charlotte Federation sponsored mine. They also provide the connections and framework for meaningful volunteer opportunities in our sister cities. That year was, as you can imagine, eye opening. As a privileged American girl, I lived in absorption centers with new immigrants from Russia and Ethiopia who came to Israel with nothing. Although my freshman dorm room was more glamorous, I wouldn't trade that experience for anything. To live and volunteer with people who left everything they had to come to Israel was inspiring.

While I predominantly went on OTZMA to volunteer in hospitals

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