

Community News

Community Visionary Marvin Bienstock Helped Create the Shalom Park We All Have Today

By Amy Krakovitz

Editor's Note: Marvin Bienstock passed away in Columbia, SC on January 10, 2015.

"If not for Marvin Bienstock, this community wouldn't have..." Well, just fill in the blank. The more people you speak to, the longer the list of things in Shalom Park that might never have come to be if not for Marvin's leadership and involvement.

Bienstock was brought to Charlotte in 1975 as a director of the Jewish Federation of Greater

Charlotte and the Jewish Community Center, both part time positions. The JCC immediately benefitted from his innovative ideas.

"Generally, the JCC was open in the summer, and very few activities took place once the pool was closed," Ruth Goldberg reminisced. "The Tuesday night poker game and maybe the restaurant was open a few nights a week, but otherwise, there was no Jewish programming throughout the year." Marvin initiated new ideas

for programs all year round at the JCC: book club, art classes, exercise classes, and more, including the first Jewish summer day camp in Charlotte.

"He wasn't the kind of manager who sat behind his desk," Goldberg continued. "In the summer he was always around the pool, shaking people's hands. Marvin was a people person. You would always find him out and about, very visible, very much a part of the community."

In his capacity as Federation executive director, Bienstock "transformed Charlotte's campaign into a professional endeavor from what was largely a volunteer-driven effort," says Richard Klein. "He recruited new leadership, supported training, helped leadership build programming, supported young leadership, and encouraged Missions to Israel."

Jewish Family Services

"Before 1983, Ellis Berlin managed the community tzedakah fund," Sara Schreibman remembers. But the needs of the seniors became more important and Bienstock was instrumental in starting Jewish Family Services under the auspices of Federation.

Charlotte Jewish News

"Marvin was the force behind the inception of *The Charlotte Jewish News*," Ann Langman, the first editor, says. "We were publishing a bi-weekly newsletter to the community, but we both envisioned a larger publication that would cover more than the activities at the JCC. It was his idea to transform our bulletins into a

newspaper.

"Our first publication was just eight pages, but it grew until it is the publication it is today, and without Marvin's leadership, it just wouldn't have been possible."

Yiddish Institute

Thirty-seven years ago, Baila Pransky had the idea of a Yiddish Institute. She had been inspired by the B'nai B'rith Institute meetings at Wildacres and wanted to find a way to preserve Yiddish locally. When she brought the idea to Bienstock in his official capacity as director of the JCC, he said, "I want to be a part of this organization."

He helped her establish the Yiddish Institute, an annual retreat that has grown from a few local adherents to a destination weekend for Yiddish lovers from all the U.S. and abroad. And Bienstock ("Moishe," Baila still calls him) attended every one he could until his health prevented it.

Shalom Park

The idea for Shalom Park came from the lay leadership, but Marvin was always an integral part of the development. As professional staff, Bienstock never attended the planning meetings for the park, but was "always available afterward to give his insight on the next step we should be taking," according to Harry Lerner. "His best piece of advice to me those days was,

'Harry, don't get so frustrated. This is new ground you're breaking. Let people familiarize themselves with the idea.'"

Sara Schreibman saw "a little seed of Shalom Park" in the way Bienstock built relationships among community leaders even before the idea was floated. "He believed in community. ... He taught me to think outside the box and to look at the JCC we had in 1977 as a central place for Jewish activity."

Even during the talks about Shalom Park, Schreibman saw evidence of Bienstock's great vision.

"He guided the talks and discussions in such a way that we were able to create what we have today."

A Way of Touching People

"His greatest gift," Lerner assesses, "was how community oriented he was. He brought together not just the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox communities, but also our Christian neighbors. Everyone respected him because they could see how genuine he was."

Almost everyone who knew him mentioned his musical talents. He played guitar and performed at the Yiddish Institute, Pransky remembers. In a 1981 story that Goldberg wrote for *The Charlotte Jewish News*, it says, "While Marvin worked at a storefront JCC [in San Francisco in the 1960s], he would sing and play music of the period. He created a coffee house in one room of this makeshift JCC. Such groups as ... Big Brother and the Holding Company and The Grateful Dead got their start at the JCC coffee house and then went on to national fame."

"Marvin had vision," Schreibman says, "but more than that, he was an interesting person. He was musical and eccentric. He drove an old VW beetle that you could hear coming up the long driveway to the JCC."

"Marvin's love and commitment for everything Jewish, including music and Yiddish, made him a cornerstone in our community. ... I have missed his presence in Charlotte and regret this loss to the Jewish world," Klein says.

So it's true that anything any of us do today in Shalom Park harkens back to Marvin Bienstock and we should all be grateful for his tenure here.

"He understood leaders," Schreibman concludes. "He used the best of their ideas and talents to better this community." ♦

With thanks to those who contributed to this tribute, including: Ruth Goldberg, Stan Greenspon, Richard Klein, Harry Lerner, Baila Pransky, and Sara Schreibman.

JELF Awards \$750,118 in Interest-Free Student Loans for the 2014-15 Academic Year

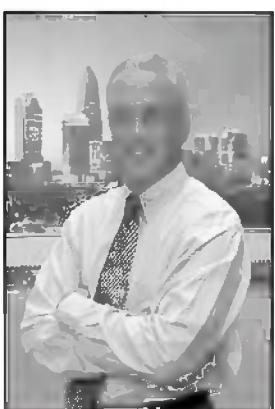
JELF (Jewish Educational Loan Fund) awarded \$750,118 in interest-free last-dollar loans to Jewish students throughout Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia for the 2014-2015 school year. During JELF's two annual loan application cycles, students came to JELF seeking to fill the gap between the resources they assembled through grants, loans, and scholarships and the real cost of their education. JELF responded to the rising need by loaning funds to 202 students across its five-state region.

While JELF currently administers over \$4.5 million in outstanding loans, it has maintained its impressive 99% repayment rate. As students repay their loans,

JELF uses those payments to make new loans, creating a circle of tzedakah. JELF loans are need-based and can be used for full-time undergraduate and graduate degrees as well as vocational programs. As one loan recipient recently expressed to JELF, "I just wanted to say thank you to JELF for another generous loan for my next school year. I will use the support to its fullest capacity in my path to my career and life."

For additional information, contact JELF Executive Director Jenna Shulman at 770-396-3080 or visit www.jelf.org. Applications for a JELF interest-free loan for the 2015-2016 academic year will be available on JELF's website at www.jelf.org on March 1. ♦

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