

Philanthropic shift

Young Jewish donors go beyond traditional groups



Scott Belsky helped create the Slingshot Fund, which gives grants for activity that it says hasn't received much support from an organized Jewish community. (Yoon S. Byun/ Globe Staff)

By Sacha Pfeiffer Globe Staff / December 13, 2007

When Scott Belsky worked on Wall Street, he attended a fancy dinner hosted by a major Jewish fund-raising group. After hearing older donor after older donor brag about the hefty checks they had written - and little about how the funds would be used - Belsky and a group of peers left early, feeling disenchanting and disenfranchised.

"We couldn't even relate to it," said Belsky, 27, a Newton native. "No one talked about how young people can add value."

Now a Harvard Business School student, Belsky (who is the grandson of Stanley Kaplan, founder of test-prep giant Kaplan Inc.) and other young, affluent Jews like him are at the vanguard of a profound shift in Jewish philanthropy.

For generations, many Jews focused their charitable giving on mainstream Jewish organizations, such as synagogues, anti-defamation leagues, the women's association Hadassah, and Jewish community centers. The biggest recipients traditionally have been Jewish federations, such as Boston's Combined Jewish Philanthropies, the country's oldest, which take in donations and disburse the money to a wide range of other charities, much like the United Way.

But unlike their parents and grandparents, whose philanthropy was typically fueled by vivid memories of the Holocaust and the creation of Israel in 1948, many young Jewish philanthropists want to fund organizations they believe directly affect their modern-day lives. They want a wider choice of charities, and they want more control over their giving.

Federations historically have "done really wonderful things, and they continue to do wonderful things, but they don't reach out to my demographic very well," said Jessica Warren, 27, a New York University graduate

student whose wealthy family has a private foundation. "They're so huge and amalgamous, and they don't hit the niche interests that a lot of people my age have."

This thinking has benefited organizations such as InterfaithFamily.com <http://interfaithfamily.com/> , a Newton nonprofit that provides support for relationships between Jews and non-Jews. It has struggled to raise funds from traditional donors.

In years past, "I was despairing of our ability to get any significant funding because intermarriage is a very controversial issue in the Jewish community," said Edmund C. Case, the online service's founder and president.

But the website is one of just eight groups nationwide that recently received grants from the Slingshot Fund, created last year by Jews in their 20s and 30s, including Belsky and Warren. Slingshot will publicly disclose its inaugural grants this week. It describes each of its grantees as doing important, creative, underfunded work that hasn't received much support from an organized Jewish community.

Besides InterfaithFamily.com <http://interfaithfamily.com/> , recipients include JDub Records, which promotes Jewish values through reggae and hip-hop music; Storahtelling, an acting troop that performs portions of the Torah in synagogues, schools, nightclubs, and theaters; and Reboot, which uses entertainment, multimedia, and literature to prod young Jews to explore what it means to be Jewish.

Several other Jewish groups in Massachusetts are included in an annual resource guide, also called Slingshot, to Jewish organizations doing cutting-edge work. Among them are the Berkshire Institute for Music and Arts at Brandeis University; Gateways: Access to Jewish Education, a Newton group for children with special needs; the Jewish Women's Archive in Brookline; Keshet, a Jamaica Plain organization for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Jews; and Mayyim Hayyim, a center for Jewish spirituality and learning in Newton.

Few of those groups would have been on the radar of mainstream Jewish donors in the past.

The consequences of this shifting philanthropy are significant. According to a recent report by United Jewish Communities, federation giving has declined "precipitously" among Jews under 50. The same report found that nearly half of Jews between 55 and 64 gave to Jewish causes, while fewer than one-third of those between 18 and 34 did.

An umbrella group for North America's 155 Jewish federations, United Jewish Communities pools charitable contributions and distributes them to Jewish - and sometimes non-Jewish - groups such as social agencies, volunteer programs, and educational bodies.

While the organization's annual fund-raising campaign, which last year yielded nearly \$900 million, has raised increasing amounts each year, the contributions are coming from fewer people. The number of individual Jews nationwide who give money to federations has dropped to about a half-million from 700,000 as recently as 10 years ago, according to the group's senior vice president Eric Levine.

What's more, the group found that wealthy, young Jews are opening their wallets to charity, they are just not writing checks to the same charities funded by their elders.

Jos Thalheimer, 24, a New York University graduate student and Slingshot Fund founder, fits that profile. He believes federations have a "very, very important role to play in the community," but he is not a federation contributor himself.

"Right now, I have other places I find more meaningful," such as the types of organizations supported by Slingshot, said Thalheimer, whose well-to-do family has a private philanthropic foundation.

Many traditional Jewish charities realize that reaching out to young people is critical to their long-term health. They are also beginning to allow donors to have more say over where their donations go, as are other philanthropic umbrella groups such as the United Way, which are feeling pressure to be more responsive to their patrons.

"In the old days, people might have been satisfied to donate their money directly to a federation that deals with the needs of a lot of different elements of the community, as opposed to trying to make a critical difference in one particular area themselves," said Samuel I. Mendales, executive director of Hillel Council of New England, whose major funding comes from Combined Jewish Philanthropies.

"So, we now have to figure out ways of increasing our income in ways we've never had to before," such as by asking host colleges to pay for Hillel, a religious organization for Jewish college students, Mendales said.

InterfaithFamily.com <http://interfaithfamily.com/>, whose \$45,000 Slingshot Fund grant will make a significant dent in its \$850,000 annual budget, has found tech-savvy ways to connect with young Jews. Its website, for example, has downloadable guides to weddings, birth ceremonies, and bar and bat mitvahs for interfaith families. The service also helps Jews locate rabbis around the country who will officiate at interfaith marriages.

Thalheimer, one of the Slingshot Fund founders, said such outreach is more relevant to younger Jews, who have not experienced the discrimination and persecution that his father's and grandfather's generations did.

"My generation [of Jews] may be one of first to experience essentially total access to all institutions," he said, "and as that change happens you begin to see a shift in philanthropic dollars as well."

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