

Jewish Woman

MAGAZINE

Dana Bash,
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10 Women to Watch in 5771



ALSO INSIDE
Women Blowing Shofar
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Developing World

Empowering Girls to Develop Respectful Relationships

Cantor Deborah Jacobson of Temple Ahavat Shalom in Palm Harbor, Fla., has been a devoted friend and supporter of Jewish Women International (JWI). In May, she hosted seven teen girls at her home for a concluding session of our Strong Girls, Healthy Relationships curriculum—a guided discussion of dating, friendship and self-esteem that's been implemented in schools, synagogues and youth groups worldwide. For the past three years, Jacobson, a member of the JWI Youth Committee, has been teaching this curriculum to the eighth-grade girls at the Pinellas County Jewish Day School.

How did you get involved with JWI and find out about our youth programs?

An e-mail came across my desk asking for facilitators for a new project—Strong Girls, Healthy Relationships. I've always been an advocate of strong girls and strong women; when I would hear people call strong girls and women "aggressive"—particularly coming from men—it would bother me. And being a mother of two daughters made me even more committed to this issue. When the e-mail came, I felt like it was *bashert* (fate) for me to be actively involved under the reputable organization of JWI.

Which program did you facilitate most recently, and what motivated you to choose it?

I facilitated Strong Girls, Healthy Relationships: A Conversation on Dating, Friendship and Self-Esteem. I did the first workshop to become a facili-

tator four years ago with [curriculum author] Shira Epstein. Depending on the group of girls, it's different each time. Some are much more open and committed to the program than others. This time I had an amazing group who loved it—participating, learning about the issues, extremely engaged—and that's why they've been invited to be on the new JWI teen task force.

At my home, for our final session, we sat around and had dinner and root beer floats, and we talked. During the previous weekly sessions together, the girls loved the opportunity to role-play. "How to respond to a friend in need" was powerful for them. The program video also affected them deeply: hearing from people who were abused really touched them, because it showed that it really can happen to girls just like them; it happens every day to the quiet girl in the back of the room as well as the pretty cheerleader.



Deborah Jacobson

Even if they're not in any sort of abusive situation now, my hope is that they will remember these lessons and discussions and it will make a difference in their lives later and in the lives of all those they touch.

Have any of your young congregants had experiences with dating abuse that you're aware of? Have they sought your help?

Yes. A few immediately come to mind. One had a verbally abusive boyfriend who would also look at other girls when they were together. And the other had a family member who was involved in destructive behavior. And another teen talked to me about her dad being verbally abusive to her mom. It can make a girl feel very helpless in a household—a lot of emotions come out of it. Helplessness, frustration, fear, anger...After three years of facilitating these workshops, I've really seen how much girls

want to talk about friends, boys, pressures, school, sex... and how much they wish they could talk with their moms about it. Too often, their parents get uncomfortable and say, "You're too young to talk about this," but these girls want an open dialogue with their mothers. They need it. They need time and attention from their parents and a lot of listening more than talking.

I always send a letter to the parents when I'm facilitating this workshop to tell them what it's about and encourage them to call me with questions. I'm hoping this workshop can also make a difference with teen/parent relationships and lead to more intimate discussions.

What do you see as your role, personally and professionally, in the larger anti-abuse movement?

I feel that I'm a role model for these girls, having been a strong girl and now a strong woman. I'm committed to having young girls and women feel great about themselves and demand healthy relationships with a partner who is loving, who listens and is a great friend. Equality of power and respect is crucial in relationships. I want to help and empower as many girls and women as I possibly can. —Danielle Cantor *JW*



Happy 65th Birthday!

Aniversary congratulations to JWI Maplewood/South Orange Chapter, which recently celebrated its 65th year. The chapter marked the occasion with a luncheon on June 16. Lila Kantrowitz is finishing her 20th year as chapter president, and she has worked with many of the same board members for all those years. Many members have been with the chapter since its founding. *JW*