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For All Generations, For Generations to Come: Visionaries built foundation for Austin Jewish community's central address

By Tonyia Cone

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The dream for Austin's Jewish community to have a place to come together, today embodied by the Dell Jewish Community Campus, was sparked two decades ago when Philip Spertus traveled to North Carolina on a business trip.

In early 1991, Wayne Silverman, executive director of Austin's Jewish Federation, asked Spertus, while he was in the area on business, to meet leaders of Charlotte's Jewish community and check out the campus their community had built.

Spertus, who had become involved in Austin's Jewish community only two weeks after moving to the city from Chicago in late 1989, agreed. He was blown away by what he saw — a community center, Reform and Conservative congregations, a Chabad House and a Jewish education building.

"I was very impressed by it. It was marvelous in terms of what it was obviously doing for the community. What I was surprised about was when they told me the size of their community; it was no larger than ours and yet they had all of that," he said, noting that, at the time, Austin's Jewish Federation operated out of a few small buildings.

Gaining momentum

After reflecting on what he saw, Spertus joined forces with Harriett Kirsh Pozen, whom he had met at a fund-raising event.

Kirsh Pozen said, "We were a great team. We just meshed. He had a global perspective, and I'm very organizational."

Spertus hosted a meeting of nearly 60 community leaders Sept. 15, 1991, in his home, where he presented what he had seen in Charlotte and the possibility of doing something similar in Austin.

Although the group later functioned as a committee of the Jewish Federation of Austin, to include as many people and move forward as quickly as possible, the group (by January 1992 known as the Austin Jewish Community Plan) was not formed under the aegis of the Federation.

Spertus cited several reasons that he and others involved at the time thought having a campus was important: Austin's Jewish community had nothing like it, and community members were not connected to one another.



Rabbi Steven Greenberg (from left), Harriett Kirsh Pozen and Philip Spertus at the first Austin Jewish Community Plan advisory board meeting in the early 1990s. Greenberg, from the New York-based Center for Learning and Leadership, spoke to about 100 people about building community. *Photo courtesy of Harriett Kirsh Pozen.*

"By having a central place," he said, "we'd at least double the chances of people meeting others and even remaining in Austin, getting married and so on, instead of being divided everywhere."

Kirsh Pozen said that the group leaders wanted to have a central community like those in other cities.

"There were all these organizations in town but there wasn't one unifying address," she said. "That was our vision."

During the last part of the meeting in 1991, Spertus asked those in attendance for their thoughts on his presentation.

"The prevailing feeling — I remember this and it was almost 20 years ago now— was, it's a good idea and great if we could do that but it's very doubtful if we could raise the money and get the community unity to undertake a project like that," he said.

But enough positive things came out of the meeting that Spertus, along with Kirsh Pozen and Keith Zimmerman, established a continuing committee, which came to include people who were closely associated with the major congregations and other Jewish organizations in town and had a wide degree of community contacts.

In addition to Zimmerman, Kirsh Pozen and Spertus, the continuing committee included Susan Dell, Carol Dochen, Pam Frager, Michael Granof, Robert Krumholz, Ray Maislin, Terry Milman, Susan Sager and Hymie Samuelson.

The group moved forward, over time gaining the buy-in of community leaders with the philanthropic ability to support the project and the support of other Austin Jewish community members, with three advisory board meetings, each attended by about 100 people, and a town meeting, which drew more than 300 people, in February 1992.

Kirsh Pozen said Rabbi Steven Greenberg of the Center for Learning and Leadership, a New York-based organization, spoke at the first advisory board meeting.

“We didn’t want to just talk about bricks, mortar and money,” she said. “We wanted to create a sense of *tachlis* — holiness, spirituality and purpose — so we brought him in to talk about building community.”

Locking down the land

Spertus said the Austin Jewish Community Plan knew they faced two major hurdles: finding land on which to build a campus and funding the project in a community where most people doubted that kind of money could be raised.

To tackle those issues, three major committees were formed in November 1991: foundation and framework, which started out focusing on the framework and structure of the plan and eventually focused on fundraising; community development, which promoted community unity through two-way communication with community leaders and organizations; and study, chaired by Zimmerman and Susan Dell, which ultimately focused on building and land.

Dell and Zimmerman began looking into the property on Hart Lane, where the Dell Jewish Community Campus today is located, which Kirsh Pozen had heard about in early 1992. The group also considered four other parcels of land.

Spertus said, “The land we presently have was so head and shoulders above everything else it was almost laughable to think about anything else.”

The group began focusing on the property and started talking with Sally Sheehy, who, along with her siblings, had inherited the land from her father.

St. Andrew’s Episcopal School and a group of developers who planned to turn the land into apartments or condominiums were also vying for the property, but Sheehy liked that the Austin Jewish Community Plan wanted to turn it into a community campus, Spertus said.

Some truly pivotal moments in the history of Austin’s Jewish community took place during this period, Kirsh Pozen and Zimmerman said.

Kirsh Pozen recalled the first meeting with Sheehy, which she attended along with Michael Dell, Spertus, Realtor Sheila Plotsky, Zimmerman and his brother, Harry, a lawyer.

“That meeting was one of the most powerful experiences I’ve ever had in my life,” Kirsh Pozen said.

“We were in the homestead of the Hart property, right in that home. And it was just a very exciting time, a very heady time. You could see that it had tremendous

possibility and it might happen.”

On the property, she said, were a main house; a guest-house, which the group members envisioned as a space for Jewish Family Service; and an area with a pond, where some group members pictured a sukkah.

Zimmerman agreed that it was a magical day.

“On paper it was a no-brainer,” he said. “From a location standpoint, a number of us lived around there. But it was different from being inside it. When you drive in, you feel like you’re in the middle of nowhere — in the middle of Northwest Hills, the largest Jewish population in the city. How in the world could this be here? Our jaws were all on the ground.”

Zimmerman said one of his most interesting memories was the night when the deal on the land went through.

Michael and Susan Dell had been inspired, enthusiastic supporters of the campus idea from the beginning, and they agreed to buy the land.

When the group submitted their first offer, however, they did not hear back from Sheehy’s agent for a couple of weeks.

After many unreturned telephone calls, Zimmerman became frustrated and called the accountant acting as her agent, who said they were countering the proposal to St. Andrew’s the next day.

Ultimately, Zimmerman said, the deal needed to be wrapped up that night or they were out of the running for the land. If the agent would not talk to Zimmerman to make it happen, he would call Sheehy directly.

“We weren’t going to get into a bidding war on the tract,” Zimmerman said, explaining that he asked the agent if they could seal the deal if the group offered \$2.9 million for the land.

The accountant agreed to call Sheehy. Meanwhile, Zimmerman called the Dells and received their permission to offer \$3 million with no contingencies but environmental.

“It was a miracle they were home,” Zimmerman recalled. “I talked to them, told them what was going on. I said, tonight’s the night or it’s going to St. Andrew’s.”

When Zimmerman finally talked to the agent again, Sheehy had agreed to the deal.

“For me, it was the most excruciating, most exciting night, at least on the land purchase,” Zimmerman said. “The timing was great.”

The Dells acquired the 40 acres on Hart Lane in August 1992.

In December 1994, the Dells conveyed 22 acres to the Federation. The balance of the 40 acres was transferred at a later date.

Building community support

Once the land was bought, the Austin Jewish Community Plan knew they had to raise the money and increase community backing to carry the project forward through the building phase.

They continued trying to involve as many community members as possible, which Spertus said was one of most remarkable aspects of how the campus was created.

In summer 1992, meetings were held to hear everyone's opinions, 43 parlor meetings were held in living rooms around town, and functional committees were established to begin planning every aspect of the project from athletics to kitchen facilities.

Spertus said this was done not only as an effective way to plan the project, but also to get people talking about the campus and to build enough enthusiasm to ensure the campaign's success.

In October 1992, Peter Zandan, a community member and chief executive officer of IntelliQuest, a local market research firm, conducted a telephone survey at his expense that tried to include every identifiable Jewish household in greater Austin in an attempt to identify their needs in a community center. IntelliQuest reached 1,389 out of 2,400 households with the survey.

After a cleanup day on the land in March 1993, the Austin Jewish Community Plan opened the property up to the community for a holiday celebration and site tours May 2, which was Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israel Independence Day).

In the beginning, Spertus said, the group knew it would take a lot of money but had no idea what it would cost to build the campus and considered different visions of what the campus might look like.

One proposal was to use 23 acres for the community campus and the rest of the property for 52 single-family residential lots that would help pay for construction of the community center.

Spertus said the group also considered building the campus in phases, by first building a community center and later inviting congregations onto the campus, with the Dells holding the land for a number of years.

Kirsh Pozen said many people envisioned creating a residential senior adult facility, a day camp for children, and space for Jewish Family Service on the campus.

In spring 1992, the Austin Jewish Community Plan had hired Development Consultants of America Inc., a consulting firm that specialized in capital campaigns in Jewish communities, to conduct a financial feasibility study of Austin's Jewish community.

Some active community members said the group would never raise even \$1 million for the project.

Kirsh Pozen said, "They were all naysayers."

Zimmerman said, "It was indicative of a lot of people who had lived here a long time. They were all very

supportive of the project but believed Austin couldn't raise close to that kind of money."

Spertus explained that, while no one assumed the Dells were going to pay for the whole project, beyond them, no one in Austin at the time had that kind of money to donate.

Development Consultants of America interviewed a large number of prospective donors and identified the biggest prospects as well as who would be the most effective solicitors. The company reported that a realistic fundraising target would be \$4 million.

The Austin Jewish Community Plan also had real estate, construction and architectural professionals look into the cost of building a campus. They found that it would cost \$5 million just to build a viable community center that met the community's basic needs.

With that information in mind, the group launched a \$5 million capital campaign in November 1993.

By the time the campaign kicked off —with the slogan "For All Generations, For Generations to Come" — the group already had raised \$3.3 million toward their \$5 million fundraising goal.

Well within a year, the group reached the \$5 million goal.

As impressive as the group's fundraising success was, Spertus said, it was even more notable because it was accomplished in parallel with the regular Jewish Federation's Annual Campaign.

"Even that year, doing both the capital pledge and the operating pledge, and in many cases using the same solicitors and same staff, not to mention the same donors, we made our \$5 million goal and our goal in the operating campaign — and even did a record campaign," he said.

The group accomplished this by 1994, at which time Spertus was not as involved in the planning anymore and Kirsh Pozen had moved away.

Several things happened, they said, that kept the campus from opening for six more years. The City of Austin zoning approval process proved incredibly slow and difficult, and when costs skyrocketed in the mid- to late 1990s, it took much more to build what they had thought would cost \$5 million.

Zimmerman said, "There were just a lot of things combined with politics and trying to move two congregations that had been there for years. There was a lot of change. At the end of day, the community is better for it."

He added, "It happened for a reason at each stage. There were things that went well and different things that needed to happen at different phases. If we were truly creating something for generations, then ultimately the finished product is good."

The project was picked up again by a new wave of leaders who launched another campaign to complete the process in the late 1990s.

Formal ground breaking was Dec. 8, 1995.

Spertus said, "It is far beyond the imagination of anybody, including ourselves, how important (the Dell Jewish Community Campus) has become in our community, in attracting Jewish people to live and stay in our community."

Kirsh Pozen said that, after moving back to Austin two years ago, the first time she was back on the Campus was Yom Ha'atzmaut.

"I remembered the first time we opened (the property) up (to the community) was that day. I remember like it was yesterday," she said.

"To look at it now, you have a Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israel Independence Day, and there are hundreds of people all over the Campus," Kirsh Pozen said. "Our vision is a reality and even more than we ever imagined that it could be."

Zimmerman said that the group planted the seeds for what is seen today as a national model, as a truly

integrated campus that will offer something for people of every denomination and age for years to come.

Kirsh Pozen said that, while a lot of people gave time and money to the project, Spertus in particular served as a leader and provided financial support.

"This was very much his vision," she said. "Phil is an amazing leader and mentor."

Noting that his father and uncle created the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies and Spertus Museum in Chicago, Kirsh Pozen said, "Phil grew up in family where he saw his family create institutions. People said you're crazy, it'll never happen, but Phil saw how you create and build and he never gave up."

Spertus was effective, Zimmerman said, in part because speed and process were key to him. He said Spertus was good at working with young people and teaching that getting people involved was important to the project.

"Because the community had so much buy-in, it was everybody's creation," Zimmerman said.

Tonyia Cone, an Austin-based freelance journalist, is a regular contributor to The Jewish Outlook. Contact her at tonyia76@gmail.com.
