



# The Tween Takeover

Almost 10 years ago, the idea to give kids the keys to the PJ Our Way digital content was born — and it's been an experiment gone right ever since.

BY STACEY DRESNER

**Y**ou could call Gabi Abelson a triple threat: She's the writer, director, and talent in several videos she has created for PJ Our Way, the PJ Library program for tweens. And this triple threat is only 10 years old.

Gabi was just one of 13 members of the 2022 PJ Our Way National Design Team, a group of children between the ages of 9 and 12, charged with creating entertaining and informative content for [pjourway.org](http://pjourway.org), the PJ Our Way website.

Every year a new design team is selected to spend six months producing video book reviews, blog posts, and even how-to videos for the website's audience of tweens and parents. Selected from a pool of more than 100 impressive applicants, the 2023 design team will converge virtually in December to begin its work.

"It's such a big part of PJ Our Way's mission to empower kids and put them in the driver's

**Gabi Abelson and 12 other talented kids created digital content for tweens as a part of the 2022 PJ Our Way Design Team.**

PHOTO COURTESY OF JENNIFER ABELSON

seat when it comes to making choices about books, and the design team is a great way to do just that," says Rachel Goodman, PJ Our Way book selection coordinator and current facilitator of the design team.

The idea for this kid-generated content team came from the mind of Catriella Freedman. Freedman, now the director of author and illustrator stewardship for PJ Library, based the idea around programs that *Time* and *Sports Illustrated* ran. Concerned that children would be aging out of PJ Library at 8 years old, Freedman knew it was time to consider the program's next step. She gathered a focus group of educators, child development experts, and tweens to hash out the details.

"In Catriella's wisdom, she knew that more than anything kids need to be involved in whatever they are going to do or experience," says Engagement Officer Saskia Swenson Moss,



**The 2022 PJ Our Way National Design Team met monthly as a group with facilitator Rachel Goodman (top row, second from left).**

who managed the first design teams.

From those early brainstorming sessions, PJ Our Way and the PJ Our Way National Design Team were born. This opened a new world of Jewish books for tweens, and the design team played an integral role in making the books and the new program accessible. The team, consisting of kids from around the United States, created videos for the featured books, wrote reviews, gave their advice on marketing materials, and helped create promotional videos to share with their peers, among other important tasks.

“They were our go-to experts when we needed kid feedback,” Swenson Moss says. “We needed kid voices sharing their experiences and their excitement. Kids are not so interested in what a bunch of grownups have to say about a book, but they will listen to their peers.”

And that work was — and continues to be — crucial to the program’s success. It helps that this age group has a knack for all things digital and brings lots of creativity with it.

Gabi was already a pro at using several computer programs when she joined the design team. She hit the ground running and made four videos reviewing books, including one her favorites, *The Backyard Secrets of Danny Wexler* by Karen Pokras.

Other members of the 2022 PJ Our Way National Design Team got creative too. Mila, a 10-year-old from Virginia, took the comedy route to review *Chunky* by Yehudi Mercado.

“In the book, Hudi [the main character]

is not very good at sports,” says Mila, who reenacted parts of the book for her review. “In the video, I wanted to be funny and get a laugh, just like Yehudi does in *Chunky*. It was so fun to make with my dad off camera throwing balls at me! I also really liked picking the clips and putting them into one hilarious video.”

Some team members, like 10-year-old Linus, chose to share do-it-yourself videos with PJ Our Way readers. In one video, the North Carolina fifth grader has fun in the kitchen making snow cream, a dessert that is half snow cone, half ice cream.

“The design team members choose what they want to work on,” says Goodman. “I try to give them as much autonomy as possible when it comes to choosing their projects and expressing their creativity. Everything they make really comes from them!”

**Stacey Dresner is an associate editor for the Southern New England Jewish Ledger.**

## NEW YEAR, NEW DESIGN TEAM!

Starting in January, keep an eye on the PJ Our Way website for a brand-new crew of kids and their creative projects. Kids who missed the application period for 2022 but still want to be involved can grab a grownup and email [designteam@pjourway.org](mailto:designteam@pjourway.org) to find out how.