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REFLECTIONS: RETIRING (PROFESSIONALLY) FROM PJ LIBRARY

By Paul Lewis, FORMER PJ LIBRARY TEAM MEMBER, PROUD PJ LIBRARY GRANDPARENT

As we walked off the 18th green, my golf-playing partner asked, “Are you Jewish?” I had met him for the first time just four hours earlier when we teed off, but I wasn’t surprised by the question. I was pretty sure he was Jewish too. “Yes, I am,” I said proudly. “I thought so,” he continued. “I thought I recognized you from Mount Sinai.”

I got a good laugh from that. Clearly my fellow golfer took to heart the lesson from the Passover Haggadah, “In every generation, let each person feel as if they themselves had emerged from Egypt.” Being Jewish instantly linked us to each other and our shared story that stretches back thousands of years.

I love being part of the Jewish story. And I love telling stories, which may be why I like Passover so much and why I was a journalist for 33 years. As a family engagement program with bedtime stories at its beating heart, PJ Library was a good fit for me in 2009. I retired at the end of 2020, grateful to have had two careers where going to work didn’t feel much like work because I was so invested in the mission.

When I came on board at the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, PJ Library had a staff of a dozen, and I heard a lot of “Who is PJ, and why does he have a library?” We had launched in about 50 communities and already were distributing thousands of books each month. My job was to tell the PJ Library story to pitch it to Jewish communities throughout the US and Canada.

Frankly, it wasn’t a hard sell. Most people could see this — sending free Jewish books directly to families’ homes — was a big idea that was elegantly simple. To make the program even easier to embrace, philanthropist Harold Grinspoon would pay for half the cost of the program in every community. Harold’s method of philanthropy is brilliant: Create more

philanthropists by seeking partners and inspiring others to join him in doing *tzedakah*.

Those early days were exciting and head spinning. In a blur, we grew, and now it’s truly astounding to see children in more than 30 countries around the world receive books published in 7 languages.

However, the numbers and the books are only part of the story. It’s the impact of PJ Library that fills me with joy: the numerous people who have told me they met their best friends because they attended PJ Library programs, the families who began lighting Shabbat candles because of PJ Library, the donors who are proud to ensure a vibrant and rich Jewish future for their children and grandchildren through their gifts to PJ Library, and the kids who are excited to live joyful Jewish lives because PJ Library inspired their parents to send them to Jewish summer camp.

I’ll always treasure my memories of the mom who couldn’t wait to show me photos of the *sukkah* her family built for the first time because they were inspired by a PJ Library Sukkot book, and the 5-year-old who learned the word *tzedakah* from the PJ Library book *Bagels from Benny* and then asked her dad when he finished reading the story, “Daddy, what do we do for *tzedakah*?”

It’s not hyperbole to say PJ Library is the most effective and most beloved initiative in the Jewish world — and it’s still growing!

What an honor to have been a part of it.

