

Small but Mighty

For small PJ Library communities, a bit of smart funding can go a long way.

BY SASKIA SWENSON MOSS, ENGAGEMENT OFFICER

PJ Library reaches families across the US and Canada — from those living in larger, well-resourced Jewish communities to those in more remote locations where they may be the only Jewish family. Raising a child without a large Jewish population nearby can feel isolating, but with donor support, PJ Library family-engagement professionals work hard to create a warm, inclusive *kehillah* (community).

Gifts to small communities help ensure that Jewish families everywhere feel seen, supported, and connected. Every dollar makes a difference — the impact may surprise you.

Asheville, North Carolina

In the summer of 2020, Asheville was growing. Ashley Lasher, the executive director of the Asheville Jewish Community Center, hired Geri Garfinkel-Gershon as the new Jewish lifelong engagement director, responsible for PJ Library family engagement. “People are moving to Asheville for a variety of reasons,” says Garfinkel-Gershon. “Some are looking for good school systems and all are looking for community.”

At the time, 59 children were signed up for PJ Library, but over 100 more were on a waitlist to receive books. COVID-19 was spreading, families were staying home, and Lasher knew PJ Library offered a lifeline families could count on to safely deliver Jewish connection to children.

Lasher and Garfinkel-Gershon made the bold decision to enroll everyone on the waitlist. Their subscription numbers soared, and so did their costs.

That fall, Lasher and Garfinkel-Gershon received a \$5,000 gift from the David and Janet Polak Foundation. The gift came at a crucial time. To support their new PJ Library subscriptions, they were preparing to launch a fundraising campaign. They immediately decided to use the \$5,000 as a matching gift.

With the funds they received, Lasher and Garfinkel-Gershon not only covered the cost of their PJ Library subscriptions but also

brought families together at a “PJ in the Park” event the following spring.

“This gift from the Polak family,” says Garfinkel-Gershon, “we don’t call it a gift — we call it an opportunity. We were able to afford all our subscriptions, and even with all the families still moving to Asheville, we continue to be able to say, ‘No more waiting list!’”

Shelley Hubal began hosting family programs thanks to donor support.

PHOTO
COURTESY OF
THE JEWISH
FEDERATION
OF GREATER
BINGHAMTON



Binghamton, New York

Shelley Hubal is a one-woman show in the small community of Binghamton. As director of the Jewish Federation of Greater Binghamton, she wears many hats including that of PJ Library family-engagement professional.

When Hubal first started as director in 2019, there were families waiting to have their subscriptions renewed and new families eager to begin receiving books. Hubal’s board was committed, but her budget was tiny.

In December 2022, Hubal’s community received what she called “a Hanukkah gift.” The Donald Etra Futures Fund, recognizing that Binghamton had potential to grow, gifted the community \$2,000 to help cover subscription costs.

With this vital support, Hubal was able to do three things she hadn’t been able to do before. First, she removed the waitlist and began sending books to every family who wanted them. Second, she hosted a family

“Small communities are often overlooked, but when you specifically help a small community, a little bit goes far.”

SHELLEY HUBAL

“Judaism has to be accessible everywhere.” —Anna Etra

program for the first time. “The timing was right, the weather was good; we met outdoors at the JCC playground and sang Purim songs,” Hubal recalls. “And people just kept coming!”

And finally, Hubal leveraged the gift to raise additional local funds to keep PJ Library active. “Small communities are often overlooked,” she notes, “but when you specifically help a small community, a little bit goes far. Thanks to this initial gift from the Etra Fund, I could relax into the task at hand. I could reach out to families and welcome them to PJ Library.”



A crucial gift allowed 100 new children in Hamilton to receive PJ Library books.

PHOTO
COURTESY OF
THE HAMILTON
JEWISH FEDERATION

Hamilton, Ontario

Hamilton, a city southwest of Toronto known for waterfalls and green hiking trails, grew rapidly during the pandemic as families sought a smaller community to call home. The growth was so explosive that by October 2022, the Hamilton Jewish Federation had close to 100 new children on its PJ Library waitlist.

That’s when Gustavo Rymberg, the Federation’s chief executive officer, received some good news: Robert and Amy Arogeti were celebrating Amy’s birthday and wanted to make a gift to help Jewish communities struggling during the pandemic.

Hamilton’s PJ Library waitlist was the perfect place to start. The Arogetis made a gift of \$3,500, and within days, all 100 kids were newly signed up to receive beautiful Jewish storybooks.

Elaine Levine, the Federation’s campaign director, launched a campaign to match the gift. Thanks to generous local donors, she secured matching funds that allowed the

WHY WE GIVE

Donald Etra had a simple motto: “You’re never alone if you’re with a book.” That’s why his family decided to give to PJ Library through the Donald Etra Futures Fund, the charitable fund they created in his memory, says his daughter Anna Etra. Gifts made by the Donald Etra Futures Fund have helped small communities across the country serve more families in more ways.

Why support small communities? Living in Los Angeles and New York, Anna says, “we’ve always had the privilege of living in a big, thriving Jewish community. But we know so many Jewish people live outside of those big Jewish hubs in the US. It’s important to support the growth of smaller Jewish communities. Judaism has to be accessible everywhere.”

Seeing the impact of the family’s gifts has been rewarding. “It goes to show that every dollar counts,” Anna says. “A community can grow exponentially with a small donation. Even one additional child receiving the books or participating in a PJ Library activity is so important. It could change someone’s relationship with Judaism.”

Federation to create a family-engagement strategy and begin offering inclusive Jewish experiences to meet families’ needs. “We had a responsibility to find a match to give PJ Library the dignity and respect it deserves and to show we are all in,” Levine says.

Why is PJ Library such a priority for the Hamilton Jewish Federation? “PJ Library is filling a gap for families that don’t always affiliate with a synagogue,” says PJ Library family-engagement professional Maggie Norris. “Thanks to this gift, we put PJ Library back on the map in Hamilton.”

PJ Library provides Jewish connection to families near and far. Want to make a difference in a small PJ Library community? Reach out to us at development@hgf.org to speak to our staff about communities where your investment can make an impact.