

# Building My Village

**By Jennifer Stempel**

**PJ LIBRARY IN LOS ANGELES  
COMMUNITY CONNECTOR  
PROUD PJ LIBRARY PARENT**

*My work as a Community Connector is made possible with support from a PJ Library Alliance Implementing Partner Engagement Grant, Diane & Guilford Glazer Philanthropies, and the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles.*

**WHEN I BECAME A NEW MOM** four years ago, the transition to parenthood left me desperately seeking others who were going through a similar experience. I needed someone to commiserate with about those middle-of-the-night feedings, someone to talk me down from the worries of whether or not my child's milestones were normal, someone who felt just as unsure as I did about how to console a teething baby, maybe even someone who struggled with how to introduce Jewish traditions to a baby, like I did. I knew there had to be others going through the same thing nearby.

In an attempt to find my people, I accompanied my son to library storytimes, neighborhood parks, and music classes, but I never felt a strong connection with the parents I met. The activities were a nice change of pace, but I was looking for something deeper, an opportunity to really connect with other parents. My son was a little over six months old when I came on board as a PJ Library in Los Angeles Community Connector, and with him in tow, I set out to meet our neighbors.

I drank countless cups of coffee and cornered the market on playground playdates. I learned that, since the majority of families in my neighborhood were dual-income, weekends were prime time for family programming. Also, after being stuck inside an office building all week, the idea of doing something

active outdoors was really appealing. Mostly, these were families that spent the bulk of their time working and didn't have the bandwidth for much else, let alone anything "Jewish." This was the inspiration for a series of Shabbat meet-ups in the park. We gathered monthly for low-barrier Shabbat experiences with our neighbors. Over time, more families joined us for a chance to slow down, bond, and create friendships. It sounds simple, but for many families, these programs were the only opportunity they had to "do Jewish" and connect with other families.

By the time I announced my second pregnancy, these programs had helped me solidify my parent tribe. The isolation I felt after having my first child was not so acute, because my PJ Library community was there for me in very tangible ways. When I went in for prenatal appointments, it was a PJ Library friend I trusted to watch my older son. When we finally made it home from the hospital, our community showed up with warm meals, visits, offers to take my older son to the park, mental health check-ins, and more. While I worked very hard to facilitate the growth of this community, I had no expectation that they would step up to care for me and my family in this way. My community members, my friends, were taking care of us and giving us what felt at the time like a communal hug.

Ultimately this Jewish community of support is exactly what the PJ Library community connector program aims to foster. Our low-barrier programs act to both open the doors for lasting relationships and to model inclusive and approachable ways to explore Jewish traditions, values, and culture. By coming together as a community, families recognize their experiences as Jewish, and find community among the families they meet. These shared moments translate to meaningful bonds and traditions that will hopefully last generations.

