Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Powered by Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle

Recording Date: June 23, 2026
Last Edited: July 10, 2026

Karrie Brown

SUMMARY

Karrie Brown reflects on her evolving Jewish identity, from a childhood with limited religious involvement to serving as president of Temple Beth Shalom and becoming a dedicated leader in Spokane's Jewish community. She shares her family's immigration history, including the story of her grandfather's journey from near Kyiv and the complex ways his experiences shaped her family's relationship with Judaism. Brown emphasizes the importance of preserving family stories and historical memories so future generations can better understand their heritage, identity, and cultural connections.

Sha'Niya Black: My name is Sha'Niya Black with the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. The date is May 27th, 2026. Can you please state your first and last name?

Karrie Brown: Karrie Brown.

Sha'Niya Black: Do I have your consent to record this interview?

Karrie Brown: Yes.

Sha'Niya Black: So I'd like to start by asking, what is your connection to the Spokane community?

Karrie Brown: The Spokane Jewish community?

Sha'Niya Black: Yes.

Karrie Brown: Um, currently I am for another week, the president of Temple Beth Shalom. It's my second time being president. Um, and I'm very involved in the synagogue.

Sha'Niya Black: That is amazing. Um, what keeps you connected to your Jewish identity in Washington?

Karrie Brown: That's one of the things that I think is kind of interesting about me because, um, my, my parents moved out to this very far south suburbs of Chicago and promptly disassociated from Judaism. And then all of a sudden my sister and I became the age where maybe we better go to Sunday school, religious school, and my dad decided, okay, he's going to go research and he's going to take us somewhere so we can have a bat mitzvah. Because I think his mother wanted it. So, um, so my dad found that there were a couple of synagogues in Hammond, Indiana, which was within 30 minutes of our home, and he thought he was going to reform synagogue, but ended up at the conservative synagogue. And in the end thought that was the biggest mistake he ever made. But he enrolled us in the conservative synagogue. And I lasted less than a year. And my sister, who's three and a half years younger than me, went through the entire system and had a bat mitzvah, which I joyfully attended. But somewhere in the middle of my first year, I woke up on a Sunday morning and said, I hate it, I don't want to do it, I know I'm Jewish, that's not the problem, I just don't like having to go and my parents said, okay that's fine. So as my sister and I got older. My sister continued to be pretty involved in Judaism. Um, raised her kids to go to the synagogue. I married someone who was Catholic, and we just said, oh, we'll do all of the holidays and have fun with both of our religions. And so my son was raised until we moved to Spokane, my son was sort of raised to just do everything and enjoy it all. And, connected with both being sort of Christian and being sort of

Jewish and being absolutely nothing in the meantime. So when I arrived in Spokane, um, I couldn't find any Hanukkah candles in December, and I looked in the Yellow Pages, couldn't find any place that sounded right except for to go to a synagogue. So I went to Temple Beth Shalom, and I said do you sell Hanukkah candles? And they said, of course, here's Hanukkah candles. And then the person who was the receptionist at the time said, let me get your, uh, your name and your address and we'll send you our bulletin. And I said, no, no, no, I don't want to be a part of this. She goes, no, you can just know what we're doing. And then the next time you want Hanukkah candles, you will come here and get Hanukkah candles. So as it turned out, when I started to get their monthly newsletter, I started reading a year later that they were short a teacher, which is a whole nother story. But I thought, oh well, it's spring, and I can help out with the teacher thing since I'm a teacher. And I walked in and I said, you know, I don't know very much about Judaism. I understand the holidays. I don't know a whole lot. However, I'm a teacher, and if you give me a curriculum, I can teach the kids. And that was probably in the early 1980s. And once I started teaching, I never stopped. And my family thinks it's hysterical because of their children, I was the least they expected to ever get involved in a synagogue and become deeply religious. And yet as it turns out, I am very involved, more so than my sister ever became involved. And, um, it's a very, very important part of my life now.

Sha'Niya Black: I like that. Um, you mentioned that your parents moved to Chicago, correct?

Karrie Brown: Mhm.

Sha'Niya Black: And settled in Chicago?

Karrie Brown: Yes.

Sha'Niya Black: Um, I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about how your family's movement or migration has shaped your identity, your identity or your experience?

Karrie Brown: I honestly don't know how much of their movement, it's not anything my parents ever talked about. In fact, I do have a story I could tell you about my mom's dad coming to this country.

Sha'Niya Black: Yes, I'd love that.

Karrie Brown: But I didn't know that until after I was involved in Judaism, and I was going to a Jewish education conference in Texas, and I decided to visit one of my mom's cousins, and I went there, and she started telling me about my mom's dad in a way that my mom never spoke about my grandpa at all. And he had died before I was born. So I never met him, didn't know him. And all I had ever heard from my mom was that her, her dad had become an atheist, even though she would never have been allowed to marry my father unless she had been Jewish and her mother was Jewish and they were Jewish. But just, it was sort of in a background way because of the way that my grandfather felt about Judaism. And that's a piece I could talk about. But, um, I think my parents did the holidays, we went to my grandma's when we wanted to celebrate the holidays. My grandma belonged to a cousins club, and in the cousins club, those were the people that celebrated all the holidays, so I would say I got more of my Judaism from my dad's mom, my grandma Sarah, than I did from anybody else.

Sha'Niya Black: I'm curious, we just wrapped up listening to Ken's presentation. Um, what are your thoughts? How did that make you feel, and did anything in his story connect with maybe you or your family history?

Karrie Brown: Yeah. And that's the funny thing that came to me while he was talking. So when I went to Texas and visited this cousin of my mom's, she told me stuff, I did not have any idea. My mom always said that she didn't understand how her mom could marry her dad because her mom was a gentle person, and kind, and soft spoken, and her dad, um, was gruff and could be, she felt like he was on the meaner side and he was like a self-made man and did, um, he would buy old buildings and renovate them and then turn around and sell them and just really worked hard his entire life. And she just never connected with him. So this cousin started telling me this story of my Grandpa Saul, which was that, um, he was from a family where his father was a rabbi, an Orthodox rabbi somewhere near Kyiv. And, um, that he had 17 brothers and sisters. And of those 17 brothers and sisters, once he came to America, he brought every single one of his sisters to this country. He worked until he could afford to bring them over here. And that is why this cousin had such a deep connection. And she would tell me, she was telling me all these stories about how funny he was and how warm and loving he was, which was not the person who raised my mom. And his, uh, what my understanding came to be that he disliked his father and his family so much, and all his brothers stayed in Kyiv, but he disliked everything so much that he came here and completely disassociated from it.

Sha'Niya Black: Wow.

Karrie Brown: Yeah.

Sha'Niya Black: Um, thank you for sharing that. I'm curious, um, historical preservation is incredibly important. Why do you think personally that it matters to preserve family stories like this?

Karrie Brown: Because I think especially in today's world where we're taking pictures with our cameras that we may never look at much at all, they hardly ever get printed out, we don't look at them in books anymore. Um, people are so busy talking about the here and now that they don't think about their past or where they came from as much, so that when they do stop to wonder about it, there's no place else to go. So I think it would be of great value.

Sha'Niya Black: Thank you. Do you have any other things that you want to share?

Karrie Brown: I don't think so.

Sha'Niya Black: Okay. Thank you.

Karrie Brown: You're welcome.