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

Recording Date: March 15, 2021
Last Edited: October 27, 2026

Kevin Donner

SUMMARY

Kevin Donner, originally from Vancouver, Canada, moved with his family through Australia and several U.S. cities before settling in Bellingham, where he became actively involved in the local Jewish community to help his children connect with their heritage. He highlights the community's growth, inclusivity, and welcoming atmosphere—especially for interfaith and LGBTQ families—and expresses optimism about its continued expansion and diversity.

Martina Lancia : Okay, so today is November 15th, 2021. We're here with, um, Kevin Donner, um, for the project, uh, with the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. Welcome. And thank you for giving us this opportunity. Um, I would like to begin by asking you a little bit about your background. So where were you born and anything else you would like to tell us?

Kevin Donner: Sure. Um, I am Kevin Donner. Um, I was born in Vancouver, Canada, and, uh, grew up there. Um, moved away in my early 20s, uh, to go to, um, university in Australia to do my master's degree out there. Um, lived in Australia for several years, then moved to the United States. Um, was in Seattle for four years, then Indiana for six years. And now I am in Bellingham, where I tell my kids I'm going to die. I'm never moving again. [laughs]

Martina Lancia : Um, how how did you decide to move to Bellingham specifically?

Kevin Donner: Well, all of our moves were for my wife's career. Um, she initially, she was the one that moved to Australia to go to university, and so I moved there, um, to follow her. Um, and, uh, so she went there to, uh, to attend medical school. And, um, so that's the reason I chose there for my master's degree. And then, um, once we both graduated, um, you know, we moved to a small town in, uh, in Australia, and really, we thought we would probably settle there. Um, but, um, my, my father at the time, uh, developed colon cancer. And a short while later, my mom developed breast cancer, and it really made us feel that we were just so far from everybody we knew. Um, decided that, you know, our lives were back in, uh, in North America. And, um, so we made the decision to come to Seattle because, uh, the specialty that Angie wanted to pursue, um, she just had more opportunity for that in the United States rather than Canada. And so we wanted to be as close as we could to our family, but still in a place where she could pursue her specialty.

Martina Lancia : Um, I'm very sorry to hear about your parents and I-

Kevin Donner: -Thank you. They both recovered and are in remission. Thank you.

Martina Lancia : I am very glad. Uh, I can absolutely relate with being far away from home, so I'm glad you were able to, um, come close again. Um, so after you mentioned that you decided to move to Bellingham, how would you describe your relationship with the town and the community to be?

Kevin Donner: Yeah. So it's interesting because, um, when, you know, and I guess my relationship to the community in Bellingham, uh, relates a lot to, um, my upbringing, um, you know, so I, I grew up, uh, you know, going to a reform synagogue in Vancouver. Um, but really, that was just, you know, we would go there for, uh, Sunday school, you know, which we call Hebrew school. Um, but my dad would, you know, drop us off at the front door and be there to pick us up when it was over. Um, and, uh,

you know, again, no fault to my parents, but they really had no... no sense of investment. Um, in, you know, our synagogue life, um, you know, and, and as far as being Jewish goes, you know, we celebrated, uh, the holidays, but we weren't overly religious. And, uh, I never really felt a sense of connection. Um, and, you know, like a lot of people, after my bar mitzvah, I got the heck out of there. Um, you know, and, you know, and it relates to an old joke, um, that, uh, you know, a rabbi showed up at synagogue and there was a pest control truck in the front of the synagogue. And the rabbi goes in and says, what's with the pest control truck? And he's told that, oh, my gosh, we have a mice infestation. And no matter what we do, we can't get rid of them. The rabbi says, give me five minutes and I'll get rid of them. So the rabbi goes in and comes out and he says, all the mice are gone. And everyone says, how did you do that so quickly? And he says, I gave them bar mitzvahs, and they left and never came back. Um, and so, sadly, you know, there is a lot of truth to that. Um, and that's, you know, that's really how I felt growing up. I didn't, uh, um, you know, I didn't have a whole lot of connection. You know, it's kind of like, uh, you know, you're you're you're Jewish on Sunday for for Hebrew school. And then the rest of the week, you're just a kid trying to fit in, um, at school, I didn't have any Jewish friends outside of the synagogue. So that sense of disconnection, uh, you know, followed me. Um, everywhere else I went. Um, and then when my son was born, he was born in 2007, seven. We were living in Seattle at the time. Then I sort of felt all of a sudden this, um, you know, this several millennia crushing responsibility, um, to introduce him to his heritage. And, um, and so I, you know, I took him to, you know, several events at the Jewish Community Center in Seattle. Um, but really, more than that, I was still disconnected. Um, and then, I mean, and don't get me wrong, we're still working our way back to Bellingham. It's just, uh, it's a long, circuitous, uh, story. So after Seattle, we moved to a small town in Indiana, and, um, my, uh, my daughter, who's 12 now, was born shortly after we moved there and all of a sudden having small kids and, you know, small Jewish kids in a predominantly, um, Christian small town, I felt this enormous weight of responsibility to, um, introduce them more to their background. So there was- there was a very small synagogue there. It was a part time synagogue. Um, there would be a rabbinical student who would drive from Cincinnati once a month to have services. And unfortunately, the majority of the congregants there and again, there weren't many, um, but the majority were elderly. Um, there weren't very many young families. And, um, it just, uh, it was hard to, you know, and I felt like I had to compete against, you know, my wife, my wife is not Jewish. And so on Sundays, we would, you know, to sort of honor her background, we would take the kids to church. And there was a thousand kids there, and there was a playground and, um, fun activities all the time. And then once a month, we would, um, Saturday mornings, we would take our kids to, um, little part time synagogue. And it just it was it was a depressing experience. I feel bad saying that. Um, and when we finally, um, made the decision to move to Bellingham again, to be as close to our family in Vancouver as possible, you know, I like to say, um, you know, close enough that we could see them every day, but not so close that they could come down and see us every day. There was still an armed border in between which which was great. Um, and uh, so when we moved here and, uh, you know, I saw that there was a, uh, a fairly large Jewish community, um, and I knew that there was Sunday school. You know, I immediately claimed Sundays as, um, as the day that, you know, my kids would, uh, get their dose of Judaism. Um, and it became really important to me, um, that I wouldn't be a drop off the kids at the front door of the temple kind of parent. Um, and so I pretty much jumped in with both feet. Um, and it's funny because, you know, most of our friends are from the synagogue and, you know, and that's the way it is. Um, I mean, I assume you're not originally from New York. Um, and, you know, when you go to a place you don't know anyone, um, the majority, you know, you're starting from scratch. The majority of the people you end up being friends with are, um, you know, whatever that is. That drew you there often? Um, and so I, um, immediately became involved with, um. Committees at the synagogue, um, making friendships. Uh, I really wanted my kids to have friends that they didn't just see, you know, for 2.5 hours on Sundays. Um, but, um, throughout the week. And they developed, you know, long running friendships. Um, and so we've been here for seven years now. So fast forward to now. Um, you know, I'm on the, uh, the board of directors at the synagogue. I'm co-chair on a lot of committees or chair on some other committees. Um, and people say, oh my gosh, you're you're so involved. But I mean, really, it has purely to do with, uh, wanting my kids to feel like, um, you know, the temple is their home. And again, you know, we're not a religious family by any means, but, um, connection is important. And, you know, I spent decades feeling unconnected. Um, and I never want my kids to feel that way. And so I, uh, actually, this is my third year now of teaching, uh, Sunday school. Um, I'm the Sunday school for, um, one of my daughter's classes, and I've-I've moved up with that class so that I could have that connection with her. Um, I teach martial arts at the synagogue. Um, I've been doing that now for several years and really? Yeah. Like, I, um, the majority of our life sort of revolves around that connection. Um, and again, it all stems from not wanting my kids to feel the disconnection that I felt. And it's great. I really feel like it's been a success. Um, did that answer?

Martina Lancia : No, no, that this is this was a very well articulated and, um, structured questions. Um, answer. So thank you for, um, thank you for taking your time to explain it in detail. Um, so, so now that you feel involved and connected and tied to your community, um, what would you say is, um, maybe not the most important, but like, some of the most important, uh, events, uh, even something maybe you were told once you joined the community in terms of its history.

Kevin Donner: Um, well, one thing that, um, you know, that I've been told by lots of people is that, um, the Jewish community in Bellingham, um, wasn't always so large. Um, and what I mean by that is, um, you know, there were I guess there were always plenty of Jews in town, but they weren't affiliated with the synagogue. Um, and then our current rabbi, I think he I mean, he

moved here before us. I think he's been here ten years now. And, Um, he just hit this perfect tone of inclusion and acceptance that a lot of a lot of Jews that were living in the area, um, but weren't connected in any way, just sort of came out of the woodwork. Um, and, um, you know, and now, I mean, there's, uh, there's tons of families and, um, you know, one thing that was really, um, important for, for my family especially is that, um, they were accepting and inclusive of interfaith families. Um, again, like I said, my wife is not Jewish. Um, you know, she's Chinese. And so my kids look Chinese. Um, and they have never felt In any way. Even my wife have never felt in any way that there were anything less than completely welcome and included. And you know, one thing that makes me really happy is when my kids are at school and on, you know, a Monday morning when they're talking to their friends saying, oh, would you do over the weekend? My kids would say, oh, I went to a Purim festival, or we did Hanukkah event. And I thought, wow, that's so wonderful. Because I remember when I was a kid, I felt embarrassed being different. Um, you know, like I said, I, you know, I didn't really know any Jews outside of the temple. And I was embarrassed to be different, and I never volunteered information. I love that my kids volunteer that information. Um, and again, I think a lot of it has to do with um, Bellingham mindset and also the rabbi that we have, he's wonderful. And um, you know, I keep thinking back to, um, one of his sermons a few years ago where he said that, um, whether you're a Tefillin wrapping Jew. So Tefillin is the, um, I'm not sure if you've seen it. It's, um. Um. It's a a leather strap that wraps around the arm and, um, it, uh, the shape of the wrapping, um, spells out, um, you know, one of the names of God. It's something for more observant Jews. Um, and, um, so he said, "Whether you're a tefillin wrapping Jew or a bacon cheeseburger eating Jew, this is the home for you." Um, and I thought, wow, that's so cool. Um, especially since he's a vegetarian and he mentioned bacon cheeseburger eating juice. Um, and so. Yeah. Uh, if I answered the question or if I just went off in a tangent.

Martina Lancia : No, no, no. I mean, um, the relationship, you know, the a relationship with a community can have different shapes and forms and points of view. So this is your personal one. So there's no right or wrong answer. This is your answer. And it's um, what we want to hear. So I don't feel, you know, it's, um it's good. Um, so you would say that the way the community grew and lots of families that were not part of the community started being part of it as from the work of the rabbi you mentioned. So, like the sense of inclusion or on top of that, there's also maybe something specific that was, um, that the community tried to do maybe like in terms of events or, um, what what do you think that was something that drew people closer on top of the fact that the community was so inclusive and welcoming of everyone?

Kevin Donner: Yeah, a lot of it had to do with the rabbi's attitude, and a lot of it had to do with the attitude of the majority of the people that were there. Um, you know, like I said, most of our closest and dearest friends we've met at the synagogue and, you know, and it doesn't matter to them that we're not the stereotypical family. Um, and actually, maybe now kind of are, um, just because, uh, so many families that look like mine, um, are, are part of the temple and feel included, and, uh, are very involved and, um, it, you know, it really has a sense that, you know, whatever you want the building to be for you. That's what it is, you know, whether you're coming there to pray. Great. There's services, whether you are just looking for social aspect, um, and other Jews to hang out with and, and, uh, you know, can feel a sense of camaraderie, there's that too. Um, and so it kind of checks all the boxes, um, for most people and, um, you know, and one thing, I mean, we don't have a Jewish community center here. Um, but that has been, um, one thing that I really want to develop. And, and that's why I started teaching martial arts there a few years ago, and I'm still hoping that it's going to be the, uh, you know, the, the model of that. We can run events here that don't really have anything to do with, um, or, um, studying Torah. Um, you know, if you just want to hang out at the synagogue, um, and, and take classes with other people with similar background, you know, this is the place for you.

Martina Lancia : That sounds that sounds very nice. Um, so, so in terms of, like how what the community looks like in, in relation to other communities in the region or in the area. I mean, if, you know, maybe it's not something, um, you had a chance to investigate, but if you know anything about the differences or the similarities that the Bellingham community has compared to other. For example, the elite is they sell, you know, you celebrate and other communities might not or vice versa. Or in terms of tradition, in terms of like the people that are part of the community being able to read and understand Hebrew. Um, or maybe some people you mentioned being kosher or not, or being vegetarian and not eating meat at all. Um, so.

Kevin Donner: Yeah. So the Bellingham community is it's really interesting in that, um, you know, as I said, you know, I'm originally from Vancouver. Um, and, uh, you know, I mean it when the borders open, uh, I mean, and it just opened a short while ago, um, you know, I can be where I grew up in an hour. Um, and then, and then I also mentioned that I used to live in Seattle as well, which, you know, is about an hour and a half south of here, two hour approximately, depending on how fast you're driving. Um, so Bellingham, we're kind of in the middle. Um, and like any big city, Vancouver and Seattle have, um, different, you know, whether you're conservative reform, um, Orthodox, um, somewhere in between. Um, you know, there's a there's a synagogue or there's a community for you that will sort of fit your mold of, um, the type of community you want. Uh, in Bellingham, um, there's only one synagogue. Uh, you know, it's the only game in town. Um, and so it kind of has to span the, um. The gamut of, um, of interests and, um, it kind of has to be a big tent for everybody looking for that community. And so, you know, I think they've done a great job. Um, there's conservative minyan. Um, you know, the majority of the people are reform, uh, like myself. Um, but I

think they've had because we're in a small town, um, there has had to be this sense of, um, inclusion that might not exist in a big city. Um, you know, in a big city, you're like, I don't like those people. I'm going to go over here, um, you know, another another, um, uh, very old, worn out, uh, joke is, um, there was, uh, a Jewish guy who was stranded on a desert island, and when he was finally rescued, the rescuers asked him, wait a minute. You were here by yourself and you built two synagogues. What's up with that? And he said, oh, well, because this is the one I go to, and that's the one I don't go to. Um, and so, you know, in Bellingham, we don't have that sense because there's just one game in town.

Martina Lancia : Okay. That makes that makes it easier to understand what the differences could be, um, compared to other places. Um, so, so what would you say is, uh, like the holidays that your community celebrate? Um, maybe, maybe, you know, since we talked about a sense of inclusion, maybe they celebrate all of them to give everybody the opportunity to be part, um, or Or maybe they do otherwise.

Kevin Donner: Yeah. And and certainly things have been different, uh, like most places, um, since the Covid days, um, you know, and I think a lot of us tend to think of things, you know, um, you know, B.C., before Covid, um, and so we used to, um, you know, we used to have a lot of, um, in-person celebrations for, uh, you know, and, and again, one of my favorites, um, has to be Purim, um, because. Oh, and here's the, here's the first intrusion of my eight year old. Yes. [child enters]

Kevin Donner: Um, so when we first moved to Bellingham, um, and actually our, our our first introduction, um, you know, I'll get to for him in a second. Um, so we, um. So the building we're at now, the synagogue we're at now, uh, was under construction for probably about 20 years. Um, and, um, you know, and for the existing community that had been, um, slowly building it and slowly trying to, uh, save up the money, um, for them, it took forever for families like us. It was ready a couple of years after we showed up. Um, and so the, um, the previous synagogue, uh, the one that we were first introduced to when we moved here, uh, it was 100 years old, uh, small, old building. And, um, and actually, one of the things that kids like to do is, um, you know, there's one particular song during services where everybody stamps their feet or claps their hands or, or hoots and hollers. Um, and the kids really like to slam their feet as hard as they could, uh, on the floor at the old synagogue, because the wiring in the building was so shoddy and old that it would cause the lights to flicker. Um, and so anyway, so we were first introduced, uh, to that synagogue. Um, like I said, we've been here for seven years. Um, and I can't remember my, my wife and my son had something else to do that evening. And so I thought, okay, I'm going to take my two girls to a Friday service. And, um, again, I didn't know anybody. Um, so I was there, I think my, my youngest, uh, the one that just came in, she's eight now. Um, so she was one and a half at the time, and, um, my two girls were running all over the place. Um, there was a there was a balcony, and they ran up to the balcony during services and they were whispering down at me, "Daddy!" And I would turn up and they were doing this and, um, just anything they could do to get my attention. And I was mortified. I was, I was, I was so embarrassed. And after the service, um, a gentleman came up to me to introduce himself. And the first thing I said was, oh, I'm so sorry that my two daughters were being disruptive and making a scene during the service. And he said, "Oh my gosh, like, no, that was wonderful." He said for some reason, people got it stuck in their heads that services are meant to be solemn kid free. Um, they said no, that the they're the the life of the community. They're the future of every community. And he said it was so refreshing to see that. Um, and so that was sort of my first introduction to just the sense of welcoming. And then, um, shortly after that, um, you know, I brought my, you know, she's 12 now, but, um, um, Leah would have been significantly younger. Um, I brought her to a Purim party, and she dressed up. Um, so Purim is a Jewish holiday. Um, people dressed up in costumes, and, uh, I brought her to that, and she had so much fun. Um, and again, it it I tried to suppress the sense that, um, that this was something that I felt uncomfortable with. I was a kid, you know, again, just to highlight being different. Um, but because I suppressed that and I introduced it to my kids as just something completely normal. Um, you know, they grew up just thinking that this is this is how families are. This is what they do. Um, and so, uh, so Purim's always had a special place in my heart just because, um, you know, that was sort of the first introduction to how fun it can be to, to be connected.

Martina Lancia : And that's a lovely story. Um, about the when, when your daughters were trying to get your attention and, uh, and the person said it was refreshing. It's, it's a very nice and warming way of seeing it. Um, so where do you think the given this sense of, um, general inclusion and acceptance that the community has, where do you think this community will will be going in the future in terms of, um, structure. And, you know, I'm sure it's going to maintain this sense of inclusion. But where do you see it going in in a few years from now or in a general future?

Kevin Donner: Um, well, I mean, I assume it's going to continue to grow. Um, you know, one thing that I think is really cool is, um, and like I said, you know, our rabbi really hit this nerve, um, that, you know, not just for people that grew up Jewish, but, um, for whatever reason, um, this sense of inclusion, um, has, uh, has reached out to, uh, for example, a lot of the recent converts, um, you know, and it's funny, I always think, like, why would anyone want to join this group? Um, and, uh, you know, and, you know, and jokingly we always say, like, uh, being born in this is a curse. Why would anyone willingly join? Um, but, uh, one thing that I think is really cool and really speaks to, um, the, the sense of inclusion is a lot of the recent converts are, um, members of the

LGBTQ community that really had no connection to the Jewish community. But, um, you know, everybody, everybody needs a sense of connection. And they looked at our community and saw like, wow, that community really, um, you know, is really is welcoming. And, um, so for people looking for that connection or looking for faith or whatever it is that specifically drew them to Judaism. Um, I think they they saw that, um, you know, we're big, welcoming family. Um, and again, like it it's it's helped, uh, you know, I, I really do feel that if we were in a big city, um. I don't know, we might not be as involved if, if for if for whatever reason, um, my family had not been completely welcomed. Um, I don't think I would have been so involved. And again, I can't remember if that was answering a question or if I just.

Martina Lancia : Um. It makes sense. It makes sense because it's, um. It's what? It's keeping the community together. Nobody wants to be in a place where they don't feel accepted and welcomed, and they don't feel that sense of belonging.

Kevin Donner: Oh! And, um, I'm sorry to cut you off, Martina. I just just remembered. So one thing, you know, you. So you would you would ask, like, what do I see, as you know, the future of the community and and so, yeah, I think it's going to keep growing and becoming more diverse. And, um, you know, and one thing that, uh, that makes me think of is when we lived in that small town in Indiana, um, I remember, um, there was one time we were at a synagogue event and, you know, and I mentioned, oh my gosh, it was so depressing sometimes, um, just knowing that it was a shrinking community. Um, and I remember this fellow who was in town interviewing for a job, and he came and obviously he was Jewish, and he came to check out the synagogue And I remember, you know, him thinking like, oh, this is you know, this isn't the community I want to raise my kids in. It's it's, um, and I, you know, and I and I knew that. I mean, unfortunately, it was a dying, shrinking community. And whereas here, you know, there's kind of that snowball effect. Um, so anyone who moves to or is, is considering moving to Bellingham for work or for school, um, and if they say, well, let me check out the synagogue and see what kind of community there is. Um, you know, they'll see, oh my gosh, like, this is a vibrant, growing community. Um, and again, I think that just, uh, circles back to, you know, we're all looking for community. We're all looking for inclusion. And, um, and it's hard, um, it's hard for places that don't have that to offer. Um, you know, whatever, whatever someone's background is, and they want to be amongst people with a similar background. Um, you know, thankfully here, um, they have it to offer that.

Martina Lancia : That sounds that sounds very, um, very nice to be part of such a welcoming community. Um, one of my last questions, um, is if you know anything about the history of temple Beth-El and community that built it?

Kevin Donner: So the- no, I don't.

Martina Lancia : That's, um, that's absolutely okay.

Kevin Donner: Okay. And what community is that?

Martina Lancia : Um, so it was a whole community that was part of, uh, the whole history of the town. So, um, we were asking if, um, you know, maybe somebody that lived there for longer or had like a generation old generations here, maybe had the story, like, passed down.

Kevin Donner: Well, I do know that, um, you know, Congregation Beth Israel, um, uh, you know, it, um, it was initially founded, I know, by Lithuanian immigrants. And I know that it was initially a conservative synagogue. Um. Uh, but like anything, it, you know, evolved over the years. Um, and now it is reform, um, and, uh, you know, evolve to, you know, meet the needs of, you know, the majority of people, you know, and over, you know, one thing that I think has been really amazing, Just speaking of evolving and evolution, um, they, uh, they've done a really great job. I think, um, over the last two years with Covid, um, keeping, uh, keeping people engaged. And, I mean, I know that it's been so hard for so many communities. Um, but, uh, we went online relatively. I think we missed one day, one week of, uh, we call it catcher, uh, which means connection in Hebrew. Um, uh, but I grew up calling it Hebrew school. Um, and, uh, I think we missed one week, and then the next week we're on zoom. Um, and, um, I, like I said, I taught Hebrew school, uh, now for three years. Um, and again, it was, it was just to form a stronger bond with, um, my, uh, my middle child, Leah, and also to normalize going to Hebrew school. Um, no kid wants to wake up early on a Sunday. Um, and, uh, so I felt like, well, if if I'm, if I'm waking up and schlepping in there and teaching it, it must be a normal part of life. Um, so, uh, it, you know, we did a really good job just sort of evolving with the, uh, you know, the demands and, um, services were all online almost immediately. Um, and, uh, you know, we've always had, you know, guest speakers come or Torah study or different events. And one thing that was neat is all those immediately went on to zoom, and it actually opened up the community to more people that otherwise would not have been able to engage. Um, you know, uh, often services were Friday on a 5:30. And I mean, heck, some people aren't even, um, finished shaking off the day of work by that point, um, you know, let alone wanting to show up in person at synagogue. Um, and so it really opened up some of the avenues to be connected. And I know it was I mean, it was challenging for everybody, um, all around the world still is. But I think, uh, I think our synagogue did a really good job. Um, and, uh, you know, I taught-I taught the martial arts It's online for a whole year. Um, which was its own headache, right? Um, but

yeah, I really think, um, you know, just the mindset of, of, of rolling with, uh, you know, the evolving times, um, really helped the synagogue to, uh, to thrive and flourish over the last couple of years.

Martina Lancia : Very nice. Um, as far as my set of questions, I, uh, I don't have any more but if there's anything you would like to share, connected or not connected to what we previously discussed, feel free. Otherwise, we can, um. This was, you know, very nice. Thank you for for sharing it with me. And, uh, I'm so glad I had the chance to talk to you.

Kevin Donner: Yeah, I don't think I have anything, um, anything more to add? Um, that's about it.