Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Miriam Schwartz

SUMMARY

Miriam Schwartz is a family practice doctor based in Bellingham. She is a member of Congregation Beth Israel and served as the President of its Board of Directors. This interview discusses her experience during COVID-19, the construction of a new facilities for the congregation and the uniqueness of Bellingham's Jewish community.

Martina Lancia: Okay, so, um, today is December 3rd, 2021. We're here on zoom. Um, on behalf of the project for the Washington Jewish Historical Society. Welcome. And thank you so much for giving me this-giving me and us this time. We really appreciate it. Um, how are you?

Miriam Schwartz: [laughs] I'm doing fine, thanks. I'm happy to be here.

Martina Lancia: Um, so. So we can start this, um, interview by, um, saying that again, this is a space for you to share. Everything, anything that, um, you are comfortable with. So I just want you to keep in mind that. And I would like to ask you to begin by introducing yourself and telling me, um, whatever you want about your background and your your life.

Miriam Schwartz: Okay. Um, so my name is Miriam Schwartz. I'm 59. I've been in Bellingham 30 years. Um, uh, I'm a family practice doctor, and, um, I was only kind of peripherally involved with the Jewish community, uh, for about the first ten years. And then I got married and had children, and that was kind of my reason for getting more involved. I knew lots of the Jewish people in the medical community and some other folks, and it just kind of evolved that, that I, I joined, um. So I guess I've been a member of Congregation Beth Israel for about. 15, 15 or 16 years. And, um, I, uh, just in this summer I finished it two years of being the president of the board of directors. And so I'm working in my last year on the board. So I've been pretty involved for, uh, you know, quite a quite a long time, about 12 years with the congregation. And it was while I was president that Covid hit. So that's been another a big part of it all.

Martina Lancia: Um, and how, um, what would you say is your relationship with the with Bellingham and in general with the community?

Miriam Schwartz: I love living in Bellingham. I think it's it's probably the perfect place for me to live. It's not a giant city. It's not a tiny town. It's close to big places. If I want a city, it is easy for me to do all the things that I like to do, like gardening and knitting. And I've really enjoyed my medical practice here, and I've also really enjoyed being part of Congregation Beth Israel and this community. We have CBI, Beth Israel, uh, we have a Chabad Community here with university, there's a very small, um. Um. Oh, I can't remember. Is it? We, uh. What's the kind? Uh, what's the the part of Judaism where it's kind of more like renewal or something. You can make this part sound better in the transcript if you want. [laughs] That's fine. Uh, you know, just there's a small, like, a kind of metaphysical spiritual group, and I can't remember right now the the name for that. And we also have a Hillel up at the university, um, that we have some connection with. But in terms of kind of a standalone synagogue, Congregation Beth Israel is the the main one here. And we are a reformed congregation that we have a lot of conservative members as well.

Martina Lancia: And, um, how was your experience? So during during Covid, you mentioned that was-that was the time you were president? Um, Um, how was that experience?

Miriam Schwartz: Uh, it was, uh, it was pretty crazy. Um. Uh, Congregation Beth Israel moved from an old building into a brand new facility in March of 2018, which I know because my younger daughter's bat mitzvah was like the first Shabbat service in the new, officially in the new building. And, uh, so we were still kind of moving in and figuring out what we needed to do, and we were realizing we needed to tweak some things with, like, the acoustics and all of that. And then Covid started, and I remember right around that time in March where everything shut down, I was at work, but I kind of had to figure out on the fly how to do zoom because we needed to have a meeting and I've never used it, never even really knew what it was all about. Um, and, and we just kind of had to really jump into zoom meetings and online sorts of gatherings. So I think our, um, the religious school closed for one week. And I think that first week we didn't have any services. But, you know, the whole organization really pulled together. And by that two week mark, we were having services by zoom and, uh, getting religious school meetings by zoom as well. So it was um, it was really a quick turnaround. And, uh, I think the, I think the congregation did really well with sort of rallying, and we had to, you know, gather a group of people who had some expertise about Covid to figure out what we could and couldn't do. And it also really, um, it pushed us to. Move faster and more comprehensively on audio and video feeds for services. We had been meaning to do that anyway for, uh, for like, people who were visually impaired or who couldn't come to the building because of mobility issues and such. But then we- over this last year really kicked it up a couple of notches with really good audio and good video and streaming and a couple different, uh, cameras so that services are not just staring out of the the rabbi's laptop on the bema and figuring out how can we do things we had done completely online High holidays. And then this last one was a hybrid thing where some people were there in person and others were just participating from home. So they're there and we're it's there have been huge changes. And, uh, the religious school opened again in person this fall, which has been wonderful.

Martina Lancia: That sounds really great. I'm glad you were able to adjust. And it wasn't, um, you know, it was a very difficult time for so many things. I'm glad that went relatively well. Um, so what would you recall being a very important, um, in your opinion, of course. Um, event or happening in the history of the community.

Miriam Schwartz: The Jewish community?

Martina Lancia: Um, your community at large? But yes, if there's any, you know, if it was something relevant to the Jewish community.

Miriam Schwartz: I mean, I would think that the thing that seems the most, uh, sort of paradigm shifting for us at Congregation Beth Israel was the new building. Uh, the whole process for the new building started back in the late 1990s, and we had a long process of buying the property and then sequentially raising money and then doing what the part of the project that we could do with that money. So, uh, that took a long time, but we don't have a mortgage or any debt. But it was interesting to start with a plan that began back in the early 2000. And then here we are at 2019, 2020, 2021, using that old plan and sort of adjusting it for 20 years down the road. Um, but our old building was way too small. And so coming into a new building, we are trying to find a balance between the old and the new. You know, bringing along some of the things from the old building. For instance, we had these gorgeous antique light fixtures. And so in the foyer, we've hung some of them in this. There's a smaller light fixture that's in our beit midrash where we have our meetings and such. Um, and we just installed the old Nir Tamid in front of this gorgeous brand new ark that we designed and, and built over time. So, uh, and we're still we still have projects we're finishing up. So, uh, slowly but surely, it's feeling more and more like home. So that was a big event. I can't think of- I mean, there's so many little things that have impacted all of us back in, I think it was 2006, there was a pipeline explosion that affected a lot of people. Obviously, Covid affected a lot of people in the community. Uh, the racial tension and the anti-Semitism have been, uh, some issues for us as well. But in general, I think the community is pretty accepting of differences. And in fact, right before Covid hit, uh, we were. Having a series of shared, like, there was a Christian church, um, a muslim gathering place and our synagogue. And we were taking turns going to each other's, uh, houses of worship. And, uh, we had to cancel ours because of Covid, but we try to get along and support each other.

Martina Lancia: That sounds very nice. Um, so. So, speaking of the community, more, uh, in detail, um, do you have any do you have a sense of what makes, um, Bellingham's community unique? In relation to other communities in the area, like in terms of holidays, traditions for the events day. It can be anything but is there- Is there like a like a different that comes to mind?

Miriam Schwartz: Um, well, Bellingham is in Whatcom County, which is actually a pretty large county in Washington. Um, there's definitely sort of a a difference between semi urban Bellingham and the rural community, uh, politically and religiously too. And CBI also, uh, serves as, uh, the synagogue for folks in Mount Vernon and in Skagit County just to the south of us. Um, uh, Bellingham itself is quite liberal and the county less so. Uh, we certainly don't have all of the Jews in the area affiliated with our synagogue, but everybody certainly is welcome. Um, one of the things that Bellingham in Whatcom County, one of our traditions every year is, um, a big relay race called, uh, Ski to Sea. And that's been going on for over 50 years, I think, where teams from the local area and even around the country, uh, form teams snd then there are different legs, like there's a ski leg and a cross-country ski leg, and then there's a road bike, a running, a canoeing leg, and I think there's a cross-country bike leg and then a kayak

paddle. And so this is this is like one of our signature events we have every Memorial Day weekend. Uh, we have a university here in town. Western Washington University. And that's wonderful because it brings in a lot of, um, arts events. And it also just has a lot of academic, uh, speakers and just that academic, uh, focus that I think makes Bellingham a pretty special place.

Martina Lancia: Very nice. Um, so, so. Every so all the people I've interviewed so far have talked about how much the community is welcoming and accepting of others. And this is, you know, it really creates a beautiful image of for someone that comes from the outside and doesn't know the community really brings a warm and loving idea of this community. Um, so given this, um, this image that, uh, so many people have created of the community, where do you see it going in in the future?

Miriam Schwartz: Well, hopefully it will stay as similarly welcoming and diverse community, I do think we are becoming more diverse. Um, since I've been here for 30 years. It used to be extremely white and we are getting a little bit more diversity, but we have, uh, for a long time now, we've had for 100 years we've had a Sikh community, uh, East Indian, um, neighbors, uh, we have a large, uh, Hispanic community. A lot of those have been migrant workers who subsequently settled in and stayed. Uh, we have a large Ukrainian community, um, that has settled here, a lot of Vietnamese folks who live in town. So I just, uh, imagine that we'll get more and more diverse. You know, it's, uh, the the city's pretty liberal, too, in terms of LGBTQ sorts of things. We do also have a real, uh, it seems to me, a pretty sizable homeless community. So I'm not really sure what's going to happen with that. Hopefully we can, um. find a way to ameliorate that. Um. Oh, what was I thinking... there's trying to find a balance between, um, urban and a growing population in the cities, and, uh, the agricultural and farmland, uh, has been a struggle, and I don't really have any sense for how that's going to play out. Uh, most of the people are pretty, uh, ecologically green. And so I'm really hoping that we will continue to push for more green energy, environmental consciousness stuff. Yeah.

Martina Lancia: And that definitely sounds like a good, um, like a good goal to have in mind. Absolutely. Um, do you do you, um, feel like this mindset is shared by most of the Jewish community as well? Is it a strong, like this sense of, um. Understanding and openness and, uh, is it is it a shared value within the, the whole community, even in a Jewish community or some people have more, let's say, traditional views for maybe not traditional. I don't want to I don't want to use like a restrictive term, but like a less open, um, towards the things you mentioned.

Miriam Schwartz: Um, you know, I would say 80% to 90% of CBI's community is reform and. Uh, but we do have some religiously conservative members and then certainly we have members who are politically or socially more conservative. Um, so we do have some range of opinions, but I would say overall it's pretty, pretty liberal. Um. Chabad, um, seems to appeal more to a lot of the really, uh, traditionally conservative and Orthodox members of the community. And I can't really speak to their belief systems. We have some people, uh, in the CBI community who who keep kosher to one degree or another. And our synagogue is, is vegetarian kosher, so that's how we kind of deal with that. Um, but I think overall that we are a pretty progressive, uh, community socially. And I would imagine that those Jews who are not already part of CBI may very well be similarly inclined, but that's that's just kind of a guess. Um, we are working really hard right now on, um. Encouraging and welcoming, uh, populations that are traditionally marginalized, um, Jews of color, LGBTQ, uh, we're working on trying to get people whose mobility issues are limited, you know, how can we reach out to them? So we're doing we've for so many years, the big push has been getting into the building and then furnishing it, landscaping it. And so now we're looking more toward how do we, um. How do we serve the, the population and know more what it is they want, wjat would make, uh, CBI more relevant to them and Judaism more, uh, a part of their lives if they want it to be, or in the way that they want it to be. We have a conservative minyan that's lay led that meets once a month. So I could see that we may do something more with that. Uh. I'm not- I just kind of depends on what people want.

Martina Lancia: Um, so you mentioned, um, that some of the, you know, some people in the community keep kosher to some degree. Um, speaking of these more specific, um, traditional, more traditional aspects. Um, do you know if most of the community observes, for example, um, like holidays, like, like Shabbat or, um, read and understand Hebrew or maybe just understands, maybe just reads?

Miriam Schwartz: We have um, we have a, a group of folks in town who are from Israel. Obviously, they read and speak Hebrew. Um, I think a lot of us don't really. I can as I go more and more to services, I'm it's kind of starting to come back to me more and more from when I grew up, but I don't speak Hebrew and don't really understand it that much. Um. I there's a variety, I would say, of How people observe Shabbat. Uh, we really don't do synagogue business officially on Shabbat at all, other than having services and such. Other people, uh, I think, observe a very strict no business, no whatever. Um. Shabbat. But some people just don't have the luxury of having an entire day that they can't do things. Um, so especially for those of us who are in synagogue leadership and have jobs, you know, you have to do what you have to do in order to serve the community. And so I don't really think of it as work. I think of it as sacred. Experience and, you know, serving the community. So.