Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Amee Sherer

SUMMARY

Amee Sherer, director of Hillel at the University of Washington, explores her background, career, and leadership in fostering Jewish life and inclusion amid challenges like antisemitism. She discusses strategic initiatives, community engagement, and the importance of creating a safe environment for students. Amee emphasizes the ongoing need for personal connection and community support to strengthen Hillel's impact and address students' diverse needs.

CONTENT WARNING: This interview discusses themes of hate speech.

John Hirschel: Good morning. My name is John Hirschel. I'm a member of the Archives and Research Committee of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. Today is January 8th, 2024, and this is an oral history interview with Amee Sherer, the director of Hillel at the University of Washington. This interview is taking place in Seattle, Washington. The interview is part of a series documenting professional and lay leadership roles in the Jewish community of Seattle. The purpose of this interview is to focus on issues of antisemitism, diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. This interview will be part of the Jewish Memory Archive of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. We're conducting this interview remotely using Zoom. Dennis Barnes is hosting and assisting with the technical parts of this interview, though he does not appear. Good morning. Uh, to begin, Amee, please give your name and spelling, where you were born, where you grew up, and a bit about your family history.

Amee Sherer: Thanks, John. Thanks for having me today. Um, my name is Amee Huppin Sherer. So, A-M-E-E uh, maiden name Huppin. And last name Sherer. I grew up in Spokane, Washington. I was the fourth out of five children born to Jean and Jerry Huppin. Um. Had a wonderful experience growing up in Spokane, but the Jewish community was not particularly large. There was one synagogue at the time, and there was no day school. There was no formal Jewish education other than Sunday school through Temple Beth Shalom there. So my parents really valued making sure that all five of their children had opportunities to attend Camp Solomon Schechter. We were all very involved in USY, United Synagogue Youth. My sisters and I were all regional presidents, and it was very natural for most of us to end up here at the University of Washington. So I came over in 1983 to attend UW. Um, all three of my older siblings had gone here for at least one year. Um, and so here we are. I was planning to become a teacher. I got my BA in Jewish Studies, having spent a year at Hebrew University in my sophomore year. Um, and I petitioned the University of Washington to approve Jewish studies to be an approved major to take with me into the School of Education. And at that time, Carol Stern was working in the School of Education, and she arranged for me to have my teaching, my student teaching at the Jewish Day School of Metropolitan Seattle. So I did my student teaching there. And the woman that I was being mentored by ended up leaving, and I was offered her job. So I taught for 2 or 3 years at JDS. And then I decided I wanted to get my Master's. So I came back to the University of Washington to get my Master's in Elementary Education. And I kept running into Dan Bridge on campus. Dan Bridge had taken over as the new director of the Hillel in 1988, after 30 years of Rabbi Jacobovitz being here. Um, and so Rabbi Dan was really infusing a lot of new life and energy into the Hillel world and onto our campus. And I kept running into him on campus, and he was telling me that there was a program director opening and that I should apply. So I figured I was 25 years old. I'd never really officially applied for a job. I didn't even have a resume at that time. So I got my resume together. I applied for the job, and I had a job waiting for me at JDS. Um, and so I was kind of in a win-win situation. So when I was offered the position as the program director here, I took it because I thought that was just a great opportunity to work with Dan Bridge. Um, I stayed here for three years, at which time I met and married my husband, Michael. And I said to Dan that I was getting ready

to leave, and he said, Not yet. He said, I need you to stay one more year as the acting director so that I can take my first sabbatical. It was his seventh year. Um, so I did, and he told me kind of jokingly that it would look good on my resume. Um, and at the time, you know, Hillel was really a well-oiled machine. Um, I think our budget at that time was $250,000 a year, and most of that came through a grant from the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle. Um, and so it was just a matter of keeping the ship running that year. Um, so I accepted that I stayed one more year. And that's how Dan, in fact, got me to come back to Hillel in July of 2015 as the interim Executive Director. They were looking for someone. At that time, I'd been teaching at the Seattle Jewish Community School for 13 years, and I was looking for something new to do. Um, and so here we are. It's now 2024. So I just really loved being back at Hillel. I loved being back on campus and the energy of the students. Um, so that's how I ended up coming back to Hillel after 25 or so years away.

John Hirschel: Now that's quite the transition. Yeah, lots of experiences there. Yeah. Um, now that you're at Hillel, can you tell us what is the what's the mission of Hillel is?

Amee Sherer: I'm going to read this so I make sure I get it right. Um, our mission is to inspire students and young adults to explore, embrace, and celebrate Jewish life and identity. And we changed that mission. When I came here in 2015, there was no current strategic plan for Hillel. Um, so part of what I wanted to do was build that out again and come up with the next 5 to 10 years of strategic work. And so, a new mission statement, a new vision statement, we added five core values. Um, so I'm really proud of that. And I think that remains very steady that we really are looking to inspire students and young adults to explore, embrace, and celebrate Jewish life and identity, whatever way that might mean for them.

John Hirschel: Thank you. And then, so then what is your role then as you see as you as your leadership at Hillel?

Amee Sherer: My role is to be able to provide as many open doors as possible to our students and young adults. Here. Our Hillel is unique in that we do have this program called Connect, which serves graduate students and young adults who are in their 20s and 30s. Um, so a lot of people participate through our Hillel, through our Connect Program. And then there are just so many students on campus. We think I mean, the number one question is always, how many Jewish students are at the University of Washington? And we have no idea. We have a best guess. Um, generally we see 6 to 700 Jewish undergrads, unique Jewish undergrads each year. Um, this year, at the beginning of January, we're already very close to that 600 number, so we're going to blow right past that. Um, some of that is due to the war in Israel, and people are just truly looking for community right now and a sense of safety and well-being, and a place where they can just be. Um, the other part of that is post-COVID in the pandemic, people are just really hungry for community. Um, so our job here is to make sure that there are as many open doors and as many different ways to connect as possible, so that we're going to meet the needs of every Jewish student. That's the goal. Will we get there? I don't know, but the goal is always to see how we can be present and add value to a Jewish student or young adult, college, or young adult experience.

John Hirschel: So, as you're talking about meeting needs over the years, how has programming maybe changed regarding diversity and equity and inclusion, and accessibility?

Amee Sherer: So that's a great question. Um, one of the things that first comes to mind is pronoun use. That was a big conversation in the Hillel world several years ago, that people should be adding their pronouns to all of you know, I see here on my screen it says Amee Sherer, but it does not say she-slash-her. Um, I do often add that at this time, and we've added that to our website and to our business cards. Um, for some people, that's a very important accessibility space. Um, and for others who are just exploring their gender identity, it can be a little intimidating. So it's always a fine line about how you want to move forward. Um, but it is a nice thing to be able to when we're doing rounds of introductions. That is a question that is often asked now, which it certainly wasn't when I was in school. Um, so I would say we have gender neutral bathrooms at Hillel now. So, two, you know, we have three sets of bathrooms on each floor of this beautiful building. And one of the main, the main floor bathrooms are gender neutral, and so there's just simply a picture to let people know which bathroom has a urinal and which bathroom has stalls. But both bathrooms have stalls. And it's just, you know, those are the kinds of things we're thinking about now in terms of diversity and equity and inclusion. That's really a very important piece of the work we did as a board of directors and as a staff, immediately following the George Floyd incident. And, it was very important to us to bring in an an expert, if you will, we. I hired Diana Falchuk, who is really working in this space quite a bit. She came in and did an eight-hour training that was four hours, and then an additional four hours for my staff and board together. Um, we had a DEI committee on our board. We really took a good look. We always look at the diversity of our board members. We're always looking for age diversity, religious affiliation, diversity, and different. You know, we want to be able to meet the needs of what's happening at the board level. So you want to make sure you have an attorney on your board. You want to make sure you have somebody who's in real estate and all the different things. So then we really started also looking at do we have Jews of color represented on our board? Um, and you don't want to bring in a token Jew of color. You want to have someone who authentically connects with your mission and your vision for the organization and who has a unique and authentic, you know, reason to be there. Um, at that time, we also realized that we had Jews of color

who were coming to Hillel and wanted to really lift up their voices in a way that was meaningful to them. Um, so I invited a couple of Jews of color who were on our board at the time to mentor and work with this group of students. Um, and so we had a Jews of Color affinity group at Hillel. We started thinking in really meaningful and thoughtful ways about what kind of food we are serving, like? Is every Shabbat dinner chicken and matzo ball soup? Because that's not going to be meaningful to a student who has a Sephardic background or an Ethiopian background, or a Japanese background, or whatever it might be. So we've been thinking thoughtfully about menu. We've been thinking thoughtfully about the kinds of programming and the range of programming, so it's been very much integrated. I'm not. It's kind of like when I was at the day school, you didn't want to teach Tikkun Olam. You didn't want to teach about Tzedakah, right? You want to Derech Eretz the way you treat other people. It's not a lesson that you teach. It's a way that you act in a way that you are in the world. And so with DEI, it was very important to me not to have it be. Oh, now we're talking about DEI, but rather, how do we integrate that into everything that we're doing so that it just becomes part of the fabric and the tapestry of the work that we do here at Hillel? So that's been very important to me, and I think I feel proud of the work that we've done to raise awareness. Um, you know, certainly Hill International did a lot in this space around hiring and making sure that people of diverse backgrounds had lots of opportunities or the same equal opportunities. That had never occurred to me before, that I would not hire someone because of the color of their skin or their background. That wasn't even on my radar. But you'd be amazed at how many times that just happens. Um, so I've done that training. My staff who supervise and hire have done those trainings. Um, the board has done trainings, and we just continue this work as part of our everyday work. It's a value that we have that we hold.

John Hirschel: Thanks. Um, you mentioned earlier about students needing a place to come to, especially since October 7th, 2023, in the situation in Israel. So, how has Hillel adjusted and responded to the antisemitism and support of college students?

Amee Sherer: Um, thanks for asking that question, John. It was a lot of 16-hour days in the beginning. Um, you know, none of us really knew where it was going to go or what was going to happen, but with such an incredible atrocity, against the I mean, what Hamas did was really we I'd never seen anything like that in my lifetime trying to figure out how we could possibly respond to something like that. The first and foremost thing that was important to us was students' safety. Their physical safety, their emotional safety, their psychological safety. Um, so we immediately added hours to our security budget. Um, you know, usually we'd have a non-uniformed security officer who was always here for Passover, was always here for high holidays. Anytime we had the whole community coming or a larger event, we would have a security officer. But now it was going to be every, every Friday night. Um, the number of parents and students who called and asked if there was going to be security outside our building. That first Shabbat was record numbers. Um, you know, with the demonstrations from the Students for Justice in Palestine national organization, our chapter here at the University of Washington is called SUPER. It's Students United for Palestinian Equality and Return. Um, and they were very well organized at a national level to come onto campuses and demonstrate and cry out for all of the things that are very important on their agenda. And it was important for us to have the Jewish students for whom that was really challenging to listen to, to know that they, you know, as soon as we knew that something was happening on campus, there were a few things that we would do. We would check in with the UW Police Department and make sure that they knew that was happening. Um, I have a warm relationship with President Karzai. And so I would text her and say, This is happening. She would say, Thank you for letting me know. I've alerted all the people. She would bring it right up to the attorney general. Um, because Has, you know, coming onto campus and saying whatever you want to say. It often falls. Hate speech falls under protected speech. And so her hands were a little bit tied as the president of a public university. She couldn't stop them from coming onto campus, excuse me, onto campus, or stop them from saying certain things. But if there were ever a direct threat, she wanted to make sure that the UW Police Department was right there. Um, so we would send emails out to our student population and let them know that it was happening, so that they were not caught unaware. Um, and then we opened our building. Right. So we, um, instead of having a Hillel, you know, Hillel is always open during the day, but we very intentionally, uh, staffed it up. We asked Leah Jaffe, who's our chef, to make a huge pot of matzo ball soup. That first week, we invited board members to bake and bring in cookies or whatever, and if they had a dog that they could bring it in for a little pet therapy. Um, so those first couple of weeks, we really had a lot of students in the building just here to study. They didn't want to be on campus at the libraries. They just wanted a safer place. We had 80 students in the building that first day who just normally don't come by Hillel during the day, because many of our activities are at night. Um, we have a lot of people who regularly come here to study now. Um, so the building is busier than it normally is. Um, so more security, more food, truly more food. Um, we budgeted for about 60 to 65 students to join us every Friday night for Shabbat dinner. And now we're seeing 85 to 100 every week. Um, and then the other thing we're very lucky to have is a counselor on our staff. Um, and so we increased her hours as well, so that any student who needed access to a clinical therapist would have that, um, very lucky to have Rabbi Lauren Kurland on my team as well, who does pastoral care. Um, so anything we can do to help support and lift up, and just provide resources for the students. And then at the same time as we were doing this locally, Hillel International was really stepping into some incredible partnerships, which they don't normally do. So they partnered with the Brandeis Center and with the National ADL, Anti-Defamation League, and they created a really incredible training opportunity for close to 200 attorneys now who were giving of their time free to be a resource to students on campus. If a professor were to say something or try to figure out, even though we all know that hate speech is technically covered under free

speech. If enough hate speech incidents are happening so that you really can't do your job, and as a student, your job is to be able to attend class to study and to take your midterm and write your paper. If enough incidents happened that you can't take care of your responsibilities, you can file a Title VII lawsuit against the university. And so these attorneys have all been trained to talk through with students what that might look like, should they need that? Um, and so that's been an international has been incredible. They also did some national fundraising so that they could provide immediate grant opportunities to Hillels across the country who needed additional security, who needed additional whatever. It was that additional staff, I mean, the number of programs running right now is significant. Um, just because students need different things and we want to be able to provide them.

John Hirschel: It sounds like it was both a lot of work and a lot of response to a critical need.

Amee Sherer: Yes, and I'm very lucky to work with an incredible board of directors as well. Leslie Rosen is our current board president, and our board really stepped up. I mean, the board has even come to help serve Shabbat dinners. Um, they did that during Covid also as needed. But we have a very we're very lucky to have very dedicated board members who are hands-on in many ways so deeply appreciative to have a very deep bench of wonderful humans who care a lot about what's going on on campus and care a lot about the students.

John Hirschel: Thanks. Um, what do you think needs to be done? Maybe. Or what do you see as the future of maintaining Hillel's connection with student engagement?

Amee Sherer: A lot of student engagement comes from one-on-one conversations. Right? So we have been in since the beginning of the year, and Hillel has had over 101 one-on-one conversations. I'm sure that number is higher now. Um, we have a full-time Israel fellow on our staff this year. We have a full-time springboard fellow this year, which is unique; it's like an early engagement career professional. It's a cohort that Hillel International partners with us on. And so there are 40 springboard fellows placed at Hillel across the country. Um, I have a director of student life. I have, as I mentioned, Rabbi Lauren Kurland. So everybody's working hard, including our director, Ashley Pratt, who thinks those one-on-one connections are really important, so that you can spend time with someone, whether it's over coffee or ice cream or hot chocolate or just a walk. Um, that allows us to then learn more about a student or a young adult and then connect them to others. Um, and so it's those deep personal friendships and connections. Um, so that when they walk into the building, they're not walking into a sea of unfamiliar faces. Um, they have someone who warmly greets them with a hug. Um, with a name with how did your midterm and X class go last week? I was thinking about you. Um, I'm always amazed at how my staff remembers the names. And I also know that we invite people to put name tags on for every event. Now, because they need to know each other's names. Like, if you see someone and you met them last week, but you can't quite remember their name, it's awkward to ask them. So, every event, people come in, we invite them to put a name tag on, just the more we can do and listen, the more we can provide the kinds of programming that we're hearing. So one of the things that our Israel fellows started doing, he discovered during his one-on-one coffee dates, was that the Israeli students and the Israeli adjacent students really needed a space right now to come together and just be together. So he started a program called Chador Ojal, which is the Hebrew phrase for dining room, because he's providing dinner for them once a week. And they sign up and they tell him a question that's on their mind or something that they're thinking about talking about, and he feeds them and he eats with them, and they all connect with each other. And then they sit and talk and schmooze for half an hour. And sometimes the conversation's very serious and intense, and sometimes it's just that they need to talk about whatever it is that's on their mind. So that's a brand new program that's started as a result post October 7th. And John, it's hard to know if that program would have happened regardless of the war, because, as you know, the University of Washington didn't start classes this year until September 30th. So we were literally in the second week of classes, and we had just finished all of the High Holidays this year because the way they fell out, we had literally, when the war happened, as you remember, on Simchat Torah here in the States. And so at a time when we normally would have said, okay, we've made it through Rosh Hashanah, we've made it through Yom Kippur, we've made it through Sukkot, and now it's okay. We can now all just exhale a little bit. That did not happen this year. So instead of exhaling, we all just kind of took a deep breath and dug in yet deeper because the work needed to be done. And you have to respond at that moment in time.

John Hirschel: Well, it sounds like you're doing a terrific job with your time.

Amee Sherer: We're trying our level best and really, that's all anybody can do, right? Um, is that you just keep moving forward, and are grateful for our partners on campus. The university administration has been very responsive. Um, I'm not sure they have responded in every single way that every Jewish parent would have liked. Um, but I know that they care very much about what's happening on campus.

John Hirschel: Yeah. Okay, thanks. Um, and I understand you received an award for one of the best places to work. Is that correct? Did we do Hillel International?

Amee Sherer: Um, at the conference? They have every year. It's called the Hillel International Global Assembly. Um, where there were 1200 Jewish professionals that came together, including ones from Israel, and Canada, which is where we get a lot of our international, though I believe Hillel is now in several other countries as well. Um, yeah. We received the Great Place to Work award. It's not an award that's given out every year. It was a great honor and privilege to have that happen this year. And a really good testament to how hard this team is working right now to make sure that people are getting the time they need. You know, we also, you know, we talk about doing one-on-ones. The staff is really good about sometimes taking one-on-one walks. You know, sometimes if you've been sitting at your desk for a long time, someone will come and grab me in my office. Come on, Amee, let's go for a quick walk around the block. And so we've tried to build out those relationships amongst the staff so that we care about each other as people. I mean, there's a lot of life going on for each of us outside of work, and it's important to be able to give each other that context and space. So I yes, I'm very proud of the Great Place to Work award this year.

John Hirschel: Um, and then is there anything else that you would like to add?

Amee Sherer: Yes. I just want to offer some words of gratitude for the community at this time. They have really stepped up and been supportive financially. They've been supportive emotionally. Um, it is not every Hillel director who has their major donors call and say, This is a unique moment in time. Amee, what do you need, and how can I help? And I feel incredibly fortunate to have lived in Seattle long enough to have really built those lifelong relationships with many of our major donors, and feel so grateful that the community has come to the needs of the students. So immediately, and we have, you know, there's been all sorts of donors that have come out of the woodwork at this time that haven't given to Hillel ever or haven't given recently. Um, and we're deeply grateful to be able to use each and every dollar in the most effective and efficient way that we can possibly do that. Um, so it's very important to me that we're not asking for things that we don't need, but we are very grateful that when we do ask, people are really being very supportive. And I'm deeply grateful to live and work in a community where all of my colleagues are checking in on me. And there's a very deep sense of togetherness, which you don't see all that often. I don't know that that's something that every community can boast. Um, but we really have strong relationships with other organizations. And I just feel very grateful to be amongst a great group of community leaders at this time. And thank you, John. We really appreciate that you took the time today to sit and visit with me.

John Hirschel: Well, I'd like to thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview for the Jewish Memory Archive of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. It's very kind of you to take the time out of your very busy schedule.

Amee Sherer: So the Historical. Society does, you know, capturing these moments in time is really such a great gift to our community for generations to come. So we're very grateful to, again, another great organization doing really good work. Thanks, John.

John Hirschel: Okay. Bye-bye. Thank you.