

WOMEN IN THE COMMUNITY

WIZO AND NCJWA

The evolution of our women's organisations

REBECCA DAVIS

PAULETTE Cherny has been involved in WIZO for 47 years. She began volunteering just six weeks after her youngest child was born — and now, as national president her passion is as strong as ever.

After attending the 1979 WIZO Aviv Conference in Israel, Cherny, who was one of the youngest members at the time, returned with firm thoughts on the future of the organisation.

"I said, I think we have to change our image — and I got absolutely lambasted for it," she recalled.

"But when I believe in something, I work really hard towards it."

Cherny made her way on to the executive where "there were some people that really liked me, and others that tried to shut me down — but I always believed that I could add to this organisation," she said.



Ruth Shteinman, NCJWA NSW executive board member.

Noting one in three Israeli children do not have enough food to eat, Cherny said, "Without WIZO, the people of Israel — the youth, the disadvantaged, the women — would suffer."

Indeed, WIZO Australia has nine projects in Israel, ranging from women's clubs to daycare and community centres, and includes Makom Ba'Lev, an emergency housing and treatment centre for young women in Beersheba; and the flagship project, Ahuzat Yeladim boarding school in Haifa.

But it is not exclusively the projects in Israel where WIZO women find their meaning. In fact, Cherny has observed that programs providing outreach to our local community have been particularly appealing to the younger generations of women.

WIZO Victoria, for example, has partnered with the Winja Ulupna Women's Recovery Centre for Koori women who suffer from alcoholism or drug dependency to provide them with special packs for Mother's Day and Christmas.

Cherny is particularly excited about welcoming younger generations to join the WIZO "sisterhood". She established the role of WIZO Australasian Union of Jewish Students ambassador with Gabi Davis in 2018, and Chloe Spitalnic in 2019, who has also been appointed to the WIZO national executive.

Cherny's enthusiasm for engaging all Jewish women is echoed by National Council of Jewish Women (NSW) executive board member, Ruth Shteinman. "Our organisation was born a century ago in a time of change for women, but as the challenges keep growing, so do the activities responding to them," she told *The AJN*.

Shteinman cites the NCJWA (NSW) programs Mum for Mum and Days for Girls as being popular with younger women.

Mum for Mum "positions experienced mothers to support young women in vulnerable situations as they face the challenges of new parenthood", Shteinman explained, while Days for Girls attracts mums together with their post-bat mitzvah or teenage daughters.

Shteinman has been an active member of NCJWA (NSW) for the past two years, and one year ago, joined the board. She recalled being encouraged to bring new ideas and perspectives.

"Speaking with many young Jewish women I sense that they want to feel that their capacity for positive activism has a far-reaching purpose, which is not necessarily limited to our community alone," she told.

CEO of NCJWA Victoria, Lee Ann Basser, also emphasises the ability of



Three generations of WIZO ladies at their recent AGM. From left: Marlena Newman, Beryl Blode and Gemma Newman. Photo: Peter Haskin.

the organisation to make a difference to women and girls in the Jewish and broader communities.

"In the three short years since I joined the organisation, it has evolved from what one could describe as a traditional charity to a modern not-for-profit," she explained. "Our profile has also changed from an organisation of older women to one with a demographic that runs across the lifecycle of women and girls."

The Caring Mums program, similar to NSW's Mum for Mum and The Jam Project appeal to a younger demographic, where girls approaching adolescence are buddied with young women in their 20s.

And "the make up of our volunteers

has changed", Basser noted, with an increase of younger women and older professional women getting on board to contribute their expertise.

"We have young women on our board, on our subcommittees, volunteering in our program, on our Next Gen and Advocacy committees, and we offer events targeted at a younger demographic as well as programs that appeal to young women," she added.

Echoing Shteinman's sentiments, Basser shared that young women "want to actively participate in a meaningful way — whether that is on committees, as program volunteers or as fundraisers or by contributing their professional skills."



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