



MHA/FYOS students pack birthday bags during CommUNITY Days.

Jewish Memphis Celebrates MIFA's 50th Anniversary

By Susan C. Nieman

What is the connection between MIFA (Metropolitan Inter-Faith Association) and Jewish Memphis? More than many Memphians may realize.

On September 15, MIFA celebrates its 50th anniversary. To mark the memorable occasion, the Memphis-based nonprofit organization – whose mission is to support the independence of vulnerable seniors and families in crisis – will host a series of fall public events. And Jewish Memphians will be at the forefront as they were 50 years ago when the organization was formed.

Aside from MIFA's unique founding, its historical significance and current work, the nonprofit has a longtime and deep connection to the Memphis Jewish community through organizational leadership, volunteerism and financial support. Rabbi James Wax and Rabbi

Harry Danziger (both of Temple Israel) were involved in the formative days of MIFA, and now, Rabbi Bess Wohlner, also from Temple Israel, was recently elected to MIFA's board of directors. Paula Jacobson, a past president of Temple Israel, serves as vice chair of MIFA's board of directors.

MIFA was founded in 1968 in an unprecedented cooperative effort uniting church and community leaders to confront the growing issues of poverty, hunger and social division in Memphis. Created in the wake of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination, MIFA began as a volunteer-driven advocacy agency and has evolved into a broad-based professional social service agency with the aspirational vision of uniting the community through service.

Today, the organization's senior programs promote independence, health, and



companionship; while family programs provide basic services to prevent homelessness, stabilize families and encourage independence.

Celebratory events began the first week of September with CommUNITY Days held at various locations throughout the city. People of all faiths, races, and backgrounds gathered for this unparalleled five-day event. More than 60 congregations across Shelby County partnered on projects to benefit the community and help make us better neighbors to each other. CommUNITY Days projects were designed to embody MIFA's unity and service vision by bringing congregations together in ways that will build and strengthen relationships between their members as they serve others.

"Bluma Zuckerbrot-Finkelstein, Jewish

Community Partners (JCP) chief strategy officer, engaged 16 groups to participate in this historical event," said James Seacat, MIFA's communications director.

Volunteers were recruited from Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth Congregation, Baron Hirsch Congregation, Beth Sholom Synagogue, Bornblum Jewish Community School, Chabad Lubavitch of Tennessee, Hillels of Memphis – University of Memphis and Rhodes College, Jewish Community Partners, Margolin Hebrew Academy/Feinstone Yeshiva of the South, Memphis BBYO, Memphis Jewish Community Center, Memphis Jewish Home & Rehab, Memphis NCSY, Or Chadash Synagogue, Plough Towers, Temple Israel and Young Israel of Memphis.

"JCP purchased 1000 large brown paper bags, which were decorated by children throughout the community before they were filled," said Bluma. "Families participated at a PJ Library 'Shabbat Shalom Y'all' event, at synagogues, day schools and religious schools."

The groups bought and collected items during the weeks before and brought them to the JCP offices. There the goal was to pack 1000 birthday bags that will be distributed to Meals on Wheels clients. The birthday bags contained socks, T-shirts, toiletries, tissues, stationery, pens/pencils, postage stamps, games (e.g. dominoes, playing cards, crossword puzzle books), flashlights, blankets, gloves/mittens and winter hats.

"We are thrilled to join with our congregations, schools and agencies to help celebrate MIFA's 50th anniversary through community service," said Bluma. "Our community partners responded immediately and enthusiastically to be a part of this initiative in giving back to MIFA, which serves

such a critical role in our city. As we approach the Jewish High Holidays and reflect on how we can be better people in the year ahead, our tradition lists tzedakah (charity) as one of the deeds we should engage in as we cleanse ourselves of our past misdeeds. Letting our city's vulnerable seniors know that we are thinking of them on their birthdays is a wonderful act of tzedakah in this season."

Temple Israel and Idlewild Presbyterian Church also partnered to organize a neighborhood block party during that same week for Caritas Village in the Binghampton area.

On September 14, MIFA hosted a Legacy Day at its headquarters at 910 Vance Avenue. They unveiled a historical marker to honor MIFA's founding and pay tribute to MIFA as the city's preeminent interfaith organization.

On October 11, at 6 p.m. MIFA will host its Golden Gala at Hilton Memphis, 393 Ridge Lake Boulevard. Memphis will celebrate MIFA's past and future in a memorable evening including a seated dinner, live music, inspirational presentations, and the announcement of MIFA Center for CommUNITY, an interactive website devoted to volunteer service. The center will connect volunteers with engagement opportunities and help them understand why their service matters. It will also feature educational curricula, training tools, and advocacy resources related to seniors, homelessness, poverty, and interfaith for individuals, families and faith groups.

"Perhaps the most important factor in MIFA's longevity is what our founders knew in 1968 and what we still know today," said Sally Jones Heinz, MIFA's president and CEO. "In a city once again divided by fear, hate and suspicion and misunderstanding, MIFA offers a remedy that is both profound and

Volunteers packing birthday bags for MIFA Meals on Wheels recipients.



practical: we can know our neighbors. We offer Memphians the opportunity to know their neighbors, over 50,000 of them each year, in their greatest areas of need – nutritious food, companionship, advocacy for seniors, and shelter for families in crisis."

To read more about Temple Israel's long-time involvement with MIFA, visit <https://www.mifa.org/publications> and click on Hope in Action, Summer 2018.

Past and present MIFA board leaders from Temple Israel



Bert Prosterman



EJ Goldsmith



Jef Feibelman



Judy Royal



Rabbi Katie Bauman



Rabbi Bess Wohlner



Leo Bearman



Mark Finestone



Paula Jacobson



Paul Berz



Rabbi Harry Danziger



Rabbi James Wax