

125 Years Of Service

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NCJW/Greater Detroit builds on a legacy of aiding women, kids and families.



NCJW volunteer Libby Sherbin with a happy Back 2 School Store participant.

It's hard to think of a social action effort in Detroit that hasn't been touched by members of the National Council of Jewish Women, Greater Detroit Section (NCJW/Greater Detroit).

Child welfare? They started the Orchards in 1962 as a residential treatment center for boys. Now Orchards Children's Services is an independent foster care and adoption agency.

Feeding the hungry? NCJW/Greater Detroit's "Penny Lunch" program for school children, started in 1911, was taken over by the Detroit Public Schools and grew into its citywide school lunch program. Its Kosher Meals on Wheels began in 1973 and today provides 26,000 meals annually.

Helping victims of domestic abuse? NCJW/Greater Detroit operates Safe Place, a kosher haven for women and children.

Education? In the early days, members began offering classes in dressmaking and English literature and soon added instruction in music, German and "physical culture." They discussed establishing a scholarship at the University of Michigan as early as 1895. The Ida E. Ginsburg Scholarship Fund was started in 1902, after the death of the group's founding president, to support education for girls and women. Today more than \$100,000 is provided annually for loans and grants as part of the William Davidson Jewish College Loan Program. Over the years, NCJW/Greater Detroit members have implemented a number of literacy and educational support projects for elementary-age children.

Help for people with disabilities? In 1984, the Detroit Section published an *Access Guide for the Handicapped*. In 2003, members built the first universally accessible play area in Oakland County at Hess Hathaway Park in Waterford. *Jewish News* on Tape volunteers read and record issues of the *Jewish News* for people who are

visually impaired.

And there's more, much more. Not surprising when you consider that NCJW/Greater Detroit has been around for 125 years, two years longer than its national organization.

How is that possible?

The Detroit Section got its start in 1891, when Rabbi Louis Grossman of Temple Beth El asked some of his members to form a Women's Club "to better the condition of numerous Jewish girls and women in our midst."

The name was changed to the Jewish Women's Club in 1896.

Meanwhile, the National Council of Jewish Women formed at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, under the leadership of its first president, Hannah G. Solomon. Representatives approached the Jewish Women's Club, but the Detroit group did not affiliate with the national organization until 1925, becoming the Detroit Section, National Council of Jewish Women.

It is the oldest Jewish women's organization in the country.



During the 1920s and 1930s, NCJW/Greater Detroit offered programs for children, like the 12th Street Center Nursery School.



Board members at NCJW/Greater Detroit's All Kids Playground at Hess Hathaway Park in Waterford in 2013

Dedicated Women

The organization's mission, inspired by Jewish values, is to turn progressive ideals into action. Members strive for social justice by improving the quality of life for women, children and families and safeguarding individual rights and freedoms. Its members' collective voice has changed the world for the better, especially in the United States and Israel.

Today, the Detroit Section, with more than 1,500 members, is one of the largest in the United States. Two former section presidents, Mildred Welt and Josephine Weiner, have served as national presidents. Monthly dues started at 10 cents.

The Detroit group is one of few to have an executive director, Susan Gertner, who, since 2003, has worked out of its Southfield office. She says the organization is led by "amazing, dedicated women."

“We find needs in the community and develop services that meet those needs,” she said. “Working in partnership with coalitions and our local Jewish communal agencies, we are able to make a difference through our advocacy work and community service projects.

“Without our volunteers, our donors and the support of the community, we could not do what we do.”



Susan Gertner

Though NCJW has always been a strong supporter of Israel, its emphasis on social justice is what sets it apart from other women’s service groups. NCJW’s social action projects are many and varied, with new projects constantly being discussed.

In 1923, the national organization rallied for decent wage standards. In 1935, members supported Social Security and, in 1946, world peace.



Ida E. Ginsburg

There were resolutions in favor of civil rights, open housing, child care and school integration. Today, members actively advocate at the local, state and national levels on behalf of issues important to women, children and families. In recent years, these have included reproductive rights, domestic abuse awareness and human trafficking.

In mid-March, 13 members attended NCJW national’s triennial Washington Institute, where they learned how to advocate effectively. On April 12, NCJW/Greater Detroit will join 17 other local organizations in a rally for equal pay on the Capitol steps in Lansing, wearing red to indicate that women are still “in the red” when it comes to pay equity.

The Detroit Section frequently hosts guest speakers on a variety of topics, including a “Nosh & Knowledge” lunch series. On Oct. 30, the section will host a communitywide symposium on human trafficking.



Josephine Weiner

Still, social action is NCJW’s hallmark.

In the 1920s and 1930s, through its affiliation with the Young Women’s Hebrew Association (YWHA), the women provided a Big Sisters program and educational and recreational programs for children, including a center on 12th Street and a summer camp. (The YWHA eventually merged with the Jewish Community Center.)

NCJW members volunteered at the North End Clinic — forerunner of Sinai Hospital —

and worked with the Jewish Welfare Federation to help Jewish refugees. They supported the national organization's Service to the Foreign Born effort.

In the late 1950s, the group launched Operation Friendship to reach out to patients with mental illness. Today, volunteers work with Kadima, a community organization for those with mental health needs, and provide social programming through the Project Friendship Program.

During the Depression, NCJW started an Industrial Workshop, providing part-time work for five Jewish women, who made garments that were sold by social service agencies in the city. In the Council Kitchen, women made preserves, which were sold through the resale shop.



Susan Marwil

The YWHA's Bureau of Personal Services, which functioned as a committee of NCJW, offered help for girls who came with "disturbing problems."

In the 1960s, NCJW began speaking out on women's issues as well as civil rights.



Janet Moses

In 1997, the Just4Kids Committee started its backpack program, providing backpacks stuffed with school supplies for needy children. NCJW/Greater Detroit has continued this program and now annually provides more than 1,000 backpacks filled with school supplies to homeless children in Oakland County. In August, they'll open the third annual pop-up, one-day Back 2 School Store; up to 500 children will be able to select a backpack full of school supplies, personal items, a book and a complete new set of clothing, including shoes and a

winter jacket.

In the 1930s, NCJW was so large that it set up a Junior Council for younger, mostly unmarried women. In the 1950s, they added the "Councilettes" for high school-age girls.

The Detroit Section recently started GROW — Girls Reaching Outward — for high school girls to focus on advocacy and action. Its first issue to address will be human trafficking awareness.

Why NCJW?

Current NCJW/Greater Detroit president Susan Marwil joined when she retired from teaching in 1999.

She started by working on CASA (court-appointed special advocates), which sends volunteers appointed by the Oakland County Probate Court to check out adults applying to be legal guardians for young children in the court system. The program still exists, now called Children's Advocates, and has been expanded to provide guardianship services for older children and adults.



NCJW members help pack up kosher lunches for Meals on Wheels.

“A friend thought I would like the project and also the other women who were involved,” said Marwil of Bloomfield Hills. “I wanted to make a difference in a hands-on way, and I wanted to be with other women who felt the same way. That’s what attracted me to NCJW and what will keep me in NCJW.”

Past-president Judy Rosenberg also got involved through CASA, but found she enjoyed advocacy more than a project.

“By affecting public policy, you can affect the lives of a lot of people,” said Rosenberg of Birmingham, a retiree who formerly ran a property management business and taught at Wayne State University’s School of Business.

Rosenberg was president of the Detroit Section in 1996, when the NCJW convention was held at Detroit’s Renaissance Center. She says NCJW membership is a great way to learn leadership skills.

“I’m really proud that we offer the opportunity to mentor other people,” she said. “I’ve seen how women can grow and blossom. You’re never alone in NCJW. Someone’s always got your back.”

Janet Moses of West Bloomfield has been involved with many projects of NCJW since age 10, when she helped her mother stuff envelopes. As a teen, she was president of the Councilettes. “It’s in my DNA,” she said.



She appreciates NCJW’s versatility. “They’re involved in all issues related to women, children and families,” she said, “and the volunteers are bright, creative and energetic community activists.”

To support its work, NCJW/Greater Detroit raises funds through grants, development of Project Name Funds, tributes card sales, corporate and

NCJW members at a rally in 2005 at the United Nations regarding treatment of women and children.

individual donations, and its annual Women of Vision Benefit Luncheon.

This year the event will be held on Thursday, Sept. 8, at Congregation Shaarey Zedek and will feature journalist Jenna Bush Hagar, daughter of former President George W. Bush.

Donations and sales from the organization's resale stores are also extremely important to NCJW's success, Gertner said. The council resale store, at 3297 W. 12 Mile Road in Berkley, has been open more than 80 years, selling clothing for all and home accessories.

NCJW/Greater Detroit also operates re|design HOME Consignment at 32801 Woodward Ave. in Royal Oak, offering fine furniture, lighting, rugs, crystal and art at affordable prices. Visit www.redesignhomeconsignment.com for details.

"NCJW is an organization of women of vision who are always looking for future growth while working toward global social justice," Gertner said. "We invite the community to join us in our work and become a supporter or member of NCJW/Greater Detroit."



The Detroit Section's delegation to NCJW national's triennial Washington Institute, where they learned how to advocate effectively.

For details, call (248) 355-3300, ext. 0, email mail@ncjwgds.org, or visit the website at www.ncjwgds.org.

125th Anniversary Events

In honor of its anniversary, NCJW/Greater Detroit annual dues will be only \$25 until Dec. 31, 2016, valid through June 30, 2017. Life membership is \$350.

- An online 125th Celebratory Memory Book is being created. Visit www.ncjwgds.org to share your NCJW memory.
- On May 11 at 1 p.m., the Detroit section will hold an anniversary tea at the home of Doreen Hermelin. Cost is \$36. Call (248) 355-3300, ext. 0 for reservations and details.
- On June 29, NCJW invites the community to the Walter Reuther Library at Wayne State University to view the NCJW Archives and to Temple Beth El's former home on Woodward Avenue in Detroit, where the NCJW/Greater Detroit story began. This trip is in collaboration with the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan;