



IMPACTFUL WOMEN

March is Women's History Month and the JN celebrates community leaders making a difference in Jewish Detroit.

Jewish Detroit has long welcomed women leaders to its ranks, from Federation presidents to heads of agencies. Here we celebrate seven women who are making a difference in our community.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP



LEFT: Dini Peterson (far right) oversees suicide-prevention training at JFS.

OVERSEEING THE SAFETY NET

JFS Chief Program Officer Dini Peterson supports a multitude of programs.

KAREN SCHWARTZ CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Dini Peterson, chief program officer, mental health and safety net services at Jewish Family Service, has held almost every level of role in the organization since she started in May 2011. Peterson, who



Dini Peterson

lives in Oak Park, says starting as an intern and working her way up over the years has helped her in her current role, and influenced her leadership philosophy.

“It’s really given me an insight into what employees experience because I’ve experienced it myself, and what our service to the community looks like at every level of the organization,” she says.

Peterson today oversees mental health programs and safety net services, which includes therapy, school-based social work, disability/inclusion within the Jewish community, suicide prevention, domestic abuse prevention, crisis response and more, as well as

case management, financial assistance, healthcare navigation, information and referral services and outreach to the Orthodox community. She supports programs with guidance and strategic planning, as well as through partnerships and collaborative efforts, she says.

She’s had great examples to follow, Peterson says, including her first direct supervisor, Debra Edwards, who was director of case management services and hired her as an employee.

“I’m so grateful for her being a mentor for me early on in my career. It shaped who I’ve become,” she says. “She modeled a balance of leading with compassion and empathy, while also being professional, equitable and process-minded. I think she modeled holding these values all at the same time and created this opportunity for me to grow and eventually succeed her in her role.”

Another great example, Peterson says, is her own mother, who’s been

teaching in an area Jewish school for approximately 60 years. “While she’s been a teacher in the classroom for literal generations of women within our community, she also has dedicated thousands upon thousands of hours to volunteering for community organizations, and that has been a huge example to me of our communal responsibility, to give back or support the community in which we live.”

JEWISH JOY

In this specific moment, those in Jewish leadership are especially tasked with making sure to connect with Jewish joy, she adds.

“With all going on in the world, it can be human nature to focus on the negative, to focus on conflict, to focus on friction, and we have to make a concentrated effort to connect to the meaningful, joyful and recharging parts of our Jewish identities.”

She urges Jewish leaders to make time for self-care as well. “The term self-care has become such a buzz word, but at its core it’s about fueling ourselves so we can better support others. We cannot serve the community at our best — or, for those of us fortunate enough to be in leadership roles, model that commitment for those around us — if we’re not caring for ourselves.”

That’s especially true for women, she says, who face so many expectations, obligations and social norms.

And in terms of leadership, it doesn’t always have to be so formal, she adds. “People need leaders in their friends, in their school systems, in their synagogues, in their neighborhoods,” she says. “And there’s so much room for demonstrating leadership in our personal lives.”

In her personal life, she spends time with her husband, her son, 16, and daughters, 15 and 11, stays connected with extended family, and has lots of pride in both her home state and her Jewish experiences.

“I love Michigan springs and summers, being out by the lake, feeling connected within my Orthodox community and all the wonderful opportunities that brings,” she says. “I’m fortunate to have Shabbos in my life — that’s part of my religious observance, and that’s going to look different for everyone, but I carve out time without interruption, where I am disconnected from the business of the world and focused on my family and myself.”

Natalie DuBois, of Oak Park, works for Peterson as JFS director of family support services. She worked with Peterson over a decade ago and says she took this most recent position a few years ago because of the opportunity for them to work together again.

DuBois says she admires Peterson’s dedication to Jewish Family Service’s mission. “I think that guides the work she does. It really connects all the work I do back to the bigger purpose of the agency, to stay focused on why we do the work that we do.”

Meanwhile, DuBois says, she likes that Peterson, as a leader, gives her team members room to learn and grow. “Rather than giving the answer, which I’d say Dini always has the answer, she is always asking very thoughtful questions as a way to guide me or her other direct reports to the solution ourselves, and I appreciate it,” DuBois explains. “It helps build confidence in the people she supervises, and also strengthens our own problem-solving capacity, which is something I appreciate about her.” **JN**