

Washington State Jewish Historical Society

Berkovitz, Rabbi Will – Oral History Interview 06-09-2020

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Transcript auto-generated, edited by Laurie Levine

JE: Great, I am here with Rabbi Will Berkovitz. It is Tuesday, June 9th, 2020 and Rabbi I. I wanted to talk to you about what's been going on with JFS right now. I wonder if you could quickly take us back to last year's High Holidays or the secular New Year. You're sort of plans for 2020 in the 20s before the pandemic hit, you know, sort of what? What has been interrupted. What was the plan that's been interrupted by your current events?

WB: Yeah, well I would only say the world that was in the world that is, it's incredibly different. We had to really go through each of our all the work that we were doing. We had to basically take an organization that's been around for 128 years, working in one modality and shifted within the span of a couple of weeks to a completely different approach to serving the most vulnerable in the community. And it's really. It has been Herculean, and it's, uh, and what it's taken to make the shifts.

JE: So uhm, is there? I mean, did you have a strategic plan or a sort of a goal for the 2020 or the 20s that was interrupted? Or was it? Were you pretty much rolling with what you've been doing for over 100 years at that point? (1:21)

WB: Yeah, so what we did is, we so we did have we had a strategic plan that we've been operating under. We had our priorities for the year that we were working from. We had to have a conversation about. OK, what are we going to pause and resume when the crisis is over? But again, we didn't know and we don't know how long that's going to last. We are. We needed to look into what is what. Have we been doing? That's continues to be a priority and we're going to continue to do. Then we needed to look and say OK what is an emerging priority? What's something that is new that's come about as a result of the pandemic, and it's very important you can't separate the pandemic. I described the pandemic is the equivalent of an earthquake, but the economic impact of that earthquake is like the tsunami, so you need, we need to look at those things collectively, so we needed to see like, OK? What are the emerging priorities that we're seeing now and then? What are things that we need to sort of say, OK, you know what? This is something we were focused on. We really need to put that on. We just need to honor it and let it go for now. And that's kind of how we approached. Making uh, our path into the fog that we've been on got it.

JE: So, what are some new things that you are pivoting too and gearing up and doing now that you haven't done before? (2:57)

WB: Yeah, I would you know I would say more than doing something that's fundamentally different. What we did in what we are doing is having to almost. I almost wanted to like super charge certain things. So, for example, one thing that we've never done before it is really doing web based educational programming for parents trying to navigate. Parenting in the time of a pandemic, and so, we've hosted a series of webinars with, content experts to help parents work with talk with their kids and that's been very successful. We've expanded the number of emergency services caseworkers in order to address the significant increase in requests for financial aid. We have expanded our food bank. We had to

completely change or food bank model fundamentally from what was an we're looking at ways to continue that adaptation, as we as we move forward, we had a shift and this is complicated, but we had a shift how we see clients in their homes. You know you have people who historically have gone and worked with people and they look like you and I dressed in our normal clothes and now they're wearing protective gear and they look much more like it's, more clinical and that's a necessity, to go into peoples homes, to maintain their safety as well as our staff safety. But it is definitely changes the nature of that relationship in the nature of the dynamic that exists just simply because they no longer look like just, you know, the normal person they now look like. Somebody who's more in a clinical setting.

JE: And I mean how is it all going? You know how? How is the? How is the food banking going? and I mean obviously, the need is enormous. Uh, you know, one organization isn't gonna be able to handle it, but I mean. But how are you all? How are you doing? How is how is the group doing and. How are you being received? (5:03)

WB: You know, I think, uhm? I think, generally speaking, we're doing as good as one could possibly do under these circumstances. I mean, again, it's a fundamental shift in how things are done, so I think it's been a generally very. I don't think I could realistically ask for anything else from our staff. I think that as you said, you know the need is enormous, so, there's no way it's possible for us to address that need. One of the things we've also done is we've shifted our, you know, in the past you know we've served, so one of the things that we've shifted is, we are continuing to serve our client. Our current clients were serving former clients, but we're also, now serving professionals in the Jewish community who've lost their jobs as a result of this pandemic and the and the economic downturn that's resulted, so there are folks within the Jewish professional world who are Jewish and non-Jewish who we feel or we're obligated to make sure they get really prioritized as, they need services.

JE: What if you had to let go of that you were doing before, in order, to make the shift? (6:39)

WB: It's a great question, so we are. I'll give you an example of the food bank is. I think it's really indicative of so many things so. Our natural approach is human contact human relationship. Helping people with the social side of their lives right, as well as everything else. So that means that and dignity and client choice. That's always been a real priority for JFS, but in this world that we're in right now, we can't have people walking through the food bank. We can't have people choosing their food like they're in a grocery store, so we've had to do is shift that to pre- packaged boxed food that we hand out to people or deliver. Or bags that are already set. So instead of people coming into the Food Bank and choosing, I want this, this and this. Instead they come. They basically are receiving a bag, that the food is really still at an extremely high quality level, but it doesn't have. That sort of dignity of consumer choice, and that's a trade- off. We had to make in its the right tradeoff given the safety concerns associated with it. But that's a pretty significant shift. Similarly, we no longer are able to do, in person, clinical counseling now, or counseling in our case, management is done via zoom and it's still HIPAA compliance, so it's still very secure, but a fundamental shift in how we interact with people.

JE: And how I mean, how is that going down with everyone with you know how? How are your staff feeling about that and how are your clients feeling about it? Obviously there's nothing anyone can do about it. I just wonder if you've if you've gotten feedback. (10:10)

WB: Well, I think it's really hard. Is our staff also can't be in the building to a large point, so you know we are. (Dog barking in background) I'm sorry somebody just showed up at my door. Can I pause for a second and just open the door real quick? Yes. Sorry about that. Are you there? No worries, yeah. Hum, I'm not sure where we were.

JE: I'm not sure either, um, how are people? How is everyone taking it? (10:10)

WB: Yeah, I think so. That's what I was saying, so again, it's folks who have historically worked, really, face to face with clients who are now not able to, and so what's happened is we have staff who you know, if you're in a house where you have a multiple rooms, you can go find a quiet space to work, but if you are in a one bedroom or two bedroom apartment with a roommate, who is just your roommate and not necessarily your partner or close friend, that can really dramatically. Change your ability to interact with clients, and that's hard. And we're right now, and that's not just for JFS, frankly. I mean that's true for everybody on the planet or anybody in the in the city, and as it gets hotter out and the summer comes along and it's more stuffy, that's going to be more difficult for our staff. So, we're trying to figure out how to continue to support them. You know, it's also true in terms of if you're working with women struggling with domestic violence and you don't have an ability to. The woman who is the victim doesn't have an ability to actually be communicate safely. That's really makes it impossible, really difficult for the case managers to support them.

JE: Yeah, interesting. Uh, how I mean, this sounds like it's much. It's all more expensive than you had been budgeting for, at a time when may I don't know if you know donations are drying up or not, but I mean is there is there anything that you can tell me about? How you're doing financially? (12:10)

WB: So, the community. It's interesting. Uhm, what I would say is its fundamental, so we had to cancel another major thing we had to do is we have to cancel our major fund- raising event. You know, we usually have eleven 1200 people come to a luncheon and we raise, you know, 1.2 million dollars and we had to cancel that and completely change the approach. So, we've done OK, I think we've done well, but if the economic impact of this continues to grow the number of clients continues to grow. That could create a really, uh, I don't want to say catastrophic that sounds pretty dramatic, but a very significant challenge to our ability to continue to serve the community the way we would like to.

JE: Got it? Well, that was originally what I wanted when I you know when we reached out I wanted to ask you about the pandemic, but then since then we've had yet another crisis erupt with the killing of George Floyd and the significant, you know, public response.

WB: Yeah.

JE: What, what, how is that change things and what? What is what is your response been from where you're at? (13:43)

WB: Great, that's another great point. Well, so that our main campus building is about 3 blocks or so from where the protests are taking place on the East Precinct. So, for us that's, very challenging, I would say. You know I was up there today, and we saw, or I should say, you know the roadblocks traveling around on Capitol Hill is changed. The ability for staff to come and go, you know, as things become, I would say that even though even though their peaceful, it doesn't take much for them to become very volatile and trying to keep staff safe is really our priority. And keeping clients. They've so, for example, we had a change the closed down the food bank last Friday because the size of the

protests were growing and, again, not knowing what was happening, we had one staff person I think is Thursday, but we had to put up at a hotel because he couldn't get home. We had other folks who are, you know, basically right where the purpose or happening and, so they may have tear guests smell coming into their home. They may have. And you know, they can't sleep because there are. You know crowds and what not. So those are. Those are the depths of daily occurrence. And then there's this stance of JFS having to really step into a space which is to lock shoulder to shoulder with folks who are, who are really struggling in this in terms of supporting people of color and black lives matter. And it's, trying to figure out what is the right, what is an organization like JFS's role to support and to be? To be involved in something which affects you, know fairly significant portion of our clients. Well, we are recognizing that we're not we're Jewish organization. First and foremost, if that makes sense.

JE: It does.

WB: I mean, what's your? I don't know if you've had a chance to have a staff meeting to discuss it, but what I mean? What's your opinion about how you, how you slice that? (15:45)

WB: Yeah, so well, a couple things one, I fundamentally do think this is a part of JFS's mission because this is this is who we are. We serve the vulnerable people in our community and so for us not to take a stance would be odd. And then on top of that. Just living out are the sort of Jewish values. Sort of demands that we don't sit on the sidelines around something like this because it's an issue of justice, so it's pretty clear where we as an organization stand and where. I personally stand up in very grateful, that the board is supported me to be able to be more involved in the ways that are appropriate for us. I'd also say, that you know our work is really, you know, we're not going to be as an organization at the moment. We're not going to be, you know, joining mass protests with the expectation that every staff person would participate in that because that wouldn't be appropriate, but on the systems level, which is the area that I spend a lot of my time working in, that absolutely would be part of what we would do. And then on the frontline side, which is just serving the most vulnerable that would be critical as I've always wrote just the other day to the community, I said, "You know, I think social services the left hand of social justice," and that's part of that is part of our obligation and it's part of a Jewish obligation we've had all staff meeting last Thursday. I think it was, and it was really was more of a memorial and giving people an opportunity to come together and reflection. But it was not. We didn't expect people we didn't have. We didn't require people to be there. We just offered the space. And then I offered some of my observations, and Beth Huppin facilitated and then people read poems and did reflection.

JE: Do you think that any of um, I mean is in the way that you made changes in your programming and in the work that you do for the pandemic. Do you see anything changing with, you know, in light of the protest or does it really feel to you like it's just a continuation of JFS? (15:45)

WB: That's exactly the conversation I was having with the executive team today is because I don't want to over promise and say, "Hey everybody, we're going to be doing this thing that we can't really do" I mean, we've always been in a process around diversity, equity, inclusion within the organization, so it's not in it that is work that's been ongoing. Now, having said that, I think the question is, is you know, were it doesn't feel appropriate to at least we have to figure out what it means to really shift. What does it mean for us organizationally or client facing to change our work? I mean, currently you know in emergency services, 30% of the folks we serve, our people of color, so that's not, just food to vulnerable populations. Or that come to the door? So those are the people we serve. We don't we don't create.

That kind of a target, say like, OK, we're going to work on with this group of people, but not that group of people that wouldn't be acceptable. So, it's basically the socio economically straps and struggling people in the community. Or the people were working with, and we've always worked with, and that will continue. I think what's different is the way we work on the more systems side is probably going to change and we need to figure out what's the right place for JFS as an organization, for me as a Rabbi and the CEO of that organization, to play a role that's appropriate, for me and for Jewish organization.

JE: Well, it sounds like a fascinating process, and, uh, we may well be interested in checking back in with you. You know, in a bit of time and seeing where that those discussions take you, is there anything else that that you'd want to share right now with us about, you? Know how you guys are doing and, uh, you know how you're responding? (19:51)

WB: Yeah, I would say a couple of things. You know, one, we're probably gonna end up building an entire new build out our walk in refrigerator to add another one, because the number of people who have grown so much, we are probably going to be expanding our home delivery because, you know, our food bank is generally people over 60 that use it. That's the majority of the people that come through the Food Bank. And those are folks who are specifically in the vulnerable population, so we're going to have to continue to serve them in new ways. I would hope the community sort of sticks with us and see in an we all do sort of deeper reflection around, a systemic racism on our communal's rule communities were all in responding to it, and that we don't see it as something happening to some other people. But this is fundamentally a work of the Jewish community as well to be. To be part of the solution and not in some sort of Paternalistic Way, but in a much more humble, humble way, and I would encourage, call on everybody in the community to play that role and to and to step into that space, and to do that reflection.

JE: Are there volunteer opportunities at JFS right now? (21:43)

WB: There aren't. You can find those at our website jffseattle.org. That's a very good place to go. We always need food in the food bank. We, as you pointed, out, the economic impact is pretty significant, so we were always looking at where I was looking for donations and for support from the community. We are what allows us to be successful at what we do is really because of the uniqueness of the Jewish communities desire to serve the Jewish community but also serve the whole the whole society that were a part of. And that's, you know, that's not just in dollars, that's in dollars and an hours in terms of volunteer work that's in terms of what we're talking about. An in really spreading the conversation.

JE: Rabbi, thank you so much for your time I really appreciate it. (22:40)

WB: That's my honor and thank you. Don't hesitate to call back if I can support you all in any other way moving forward.

JE: Thanks.