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“If You Build It, They will Come”: The Norman Berman Children’s Library, 1983–2013

In 1982 the Board of Directors of the Jewish Public Library (JPL) established a Children's Library Task Force, and charged it to examine "every facet of the operation of the children's library, to determine the goals most appropriate for the library, and to recommend procedures to effect these goals." Affirming that "our children are our future and it is to them that we must look for the leaders, builders, and members of our community,"² the report recommended improvements in the areas of readers' services; cultural programming; staff; physical layout; public relations; and the role of the children's library committee. It was time for the Library to reinstate the Children's Library as the dynamic building block for interaction with the community and to become a vital force in its cultural life.

Although a Children's collection had existed at the JPL since 1921, a separate children's library, with its own premises and librarian, was not established until March 31, 1951. Its premises on Esplanade Avenue were a gathering place for children who borrowed books around which they could weave their dreams; who listened with rapt attention to poet Ida Maze as she read a thrilling story; who found in the library a comfortable place to do their homework; and who discovered that the children's section was an excellent resource for discovering new interests.³ These important services ended abruptly with the closing of the Esplanade building in 1966; the westward shift of the Jewish population had made its current location irrelevant and the costs of running the building unsustainable. From then until 1973, when the Library moved to the new premises of Allied Jewish Community Services in Cummings House, the Children's Library was not reestablished. As part of its reincarnation in 1973, the Children's Library incorporated the collections of the Boys and Girls Library of the National Council of Jewish Women and the Oscar Faerman Library, housed at the YM-YWHA, which were transferred as part of the move. In the first years following the move, the Children's Library was open on a part time basis and offered one weekly story-time, on Sunday mornings. It was managed by two half time staff members, led by Frieda Lewis. It was housed in cramped quarters on the lower level of the building, though it boasted a fine space for programs. The need for longer opening hours, more programs, increased space and enhanced collections ultimately resulted in the Task Force of 1982/83. The fruits of its deliberations resulted in the creation of one of the most dynamic children's libraries in the city and a cultural centre for the diverse communities, both Jewish and non-Jewish, that it serves.

This paper will focus on the years since 1982 and will discuss the ways in which the Norman Berman Children's Library of the Jewish Public Library (NBCL, named in 1981) has served ever-widening cultural, linguistic and diverse age groups who have in turn, through their voluntary efforts, enriched the JPL as leaders and fundraisers. It will describe the many incarnations of the Library's physical space to accommodate the changing and growing needs of collections, services and staff, as well as the evolution of children's library service to include virtual spaces. It will demonstrate how collections have evolved to reflect the changes of Jewish life through the de-

cares. Finally, it will demonstrate how innovative and diverse programs have spearheaded the Library's mission to engage children and families in an appreciation of reading, language and literature; in facilitating the acquisition of knowledge; and in connecting to the cultural life of the community.

Service Providers; Service Recipients

The JPL's Board of Directors accepted and immediately began to implement the six recommendations of the Task Force relating to readers' services; cultural programming; staff; physical layout; public relations; and the role of the Children's Library Committee. Because of budget limitations, it envisaged the process in terms of short and long-term goals. It was immediately apparent that in order to improve reader's services, beginning with increased opening hours, and to introduce more cultural programming, they would have to hire new staff. The first professional librarian to head the NBCL, Eva Raby, began to work on a part time basis in February 1983 and became a full time employee in April of that year. She joined Sharona Granovsky who had already been working in the department on a part time basis. The initial order of business was to increase hours of service by eleven hours a week, to 40 hours. The first of several renovations, to be elaborated on below, took place in the first year, creating a more efficient allocation of work space, shelving, seating and browsing room. Accompanied by an injection of fresh budgets for new books and programs, the NBCL began to flourish. In each of the years that followed circulation of materials rose by 20% each year, resulting in renewed urgencies for additional staff, space and materials. It was clear from the beginning, however, that more than books, staff and increased hours were required to bring children and families into the library, and that the catalyst to transforming the space into an active resource was programming.

The new librarian⁴ well recalled how empty the Children's Library was during her first week on the job. At first she was appreciative of those first few quiet days of breathing space, when there were few borrowers walking through the door. By the end of that first week, however, she was discouraged that so few children had found their way to the basement quarters. Everything changed, however, on Sunday morning when the gifted young storyteller and teacher Claire Berger, who was to remain with the Library for 33 years, welcomed her faithful followers to her Sunday Morning Children's Hour. Suddenly the library was abuzz with excitement. In the hours before and after her program, much-read books were returned and new ones went flying off the shelves. This was how a community library should be. It now became the library's driving concern to generate this same energy throughout the week; to encourage families and children to find their way down the stairs; and to ensure that the public knew about and used its resources. It was obvious that the key to bringing families into the library lay in increased programming. Fortuitously, this was the exact moment that North American children's librarians were pioneering new ways

to engage children and their families,⁵ which the JPL children's staff members were eager to introduce.

Until the 1980s, storytelling programs in most libraries were geared initially towards older children (five to eight years of age), followed by story hours for three to five year-olds, to which parents were not invited. These programs were considered a form of reading guidance and their "purpose was to introduce new readers to literary pleasure in the hope that the listeners would turn to the books from which the stories were chosen and read the books themselves."⁶ The findings of researchers studying the U.S. government's Project Head Start (initiated in 1965) dramatically changed the delivery of services to children in libraries. Two results from this initiative to give preschoolers from low-income black families a "head start" and improve their chances for success in the educational system stood out: it was found that where parents were involved, the programs were more successful; and it was apparent that starting with three and four year-olds was already too late. Children's librarians began to build on these findings and by the end of the 1970's were deeply invested in the child's development of language and reading skills. They focused on developing these skills by working with the parent or caregiver as well as with the child.⁷ The JPL was able to build on these developments in early childhood programming when it began to structure outreach programs that would bring children and their families into the library.

Following the directives of the Children's Library Task Force, as well as the evidence of increased library use on storytelling days, the new head of the NBCL determined to expand programs, both in number and in scope. This was encouraged by the JPL administration, which funded the librarian's attendance at the first Everychild Conference in New York⁸, where she attended toddler storytelling workshops conducted by experts in the field. During that first year (1983-84) *Sunday Story Hour* was expanded to two sessions (3-5 year-olds; 7-9 years olds). A new *Summer Bedtime Story Hour* for three to seven year-olds attracted dozens of children and their families, while the *Summer Reading Program*, a reading incentive initiative, helped children maintained their reading levels during the summer. These programs have endured over the ensuing decades and have also evolved in response to community needs. One Sunday program became bilingual, English and French, in response to the need for more French language programming; the reading program eventually expanded to include toddlers to whom books are read, as well as independent readers. Even more dramatically, the programs for toddlers that were introduced in the autumn of 1983 ensured that the NBCL would become a hub for children, parents, caregivers and educators. *Tales for Tots*, a forty-minute program of stories, finger-play, songs, rhyme and movement, targeted two year-olds and their caregivers and was soon oversubscribed. A second session was added in the next semester, each filled with 20 toddlers and their caregivers. *Yiddische Kinder* was developed in response to a request from mothers in the Chasidic community for programming in Yiddish, but

was soon attended by more secular “Yiddishist” families who wanted their children exposed to the language. Weekly story hours for preschoolers were added in French and English. Language and culture is transmitted through song and music, as much as it is through language, and in 1985 music programs for preschoolers were added. *Music with Sandy* (Kogut)⁹ proved so popular that additional sessions for varied age groups were added each year.

In subsequent years the librarian responded to the needs of young families by introducing various early childhood options. New legislation with respect to maternity leave prompted mothers (and frequently fathers) to want to spend quality time with their infants in their first year at home with baby. *Lap Sit Time* for one year-olds was introduced in 1987; a *Mother Goose* program for 6 month-olds began in 1998. Thirty years later, no fewer than eight preschool programs were offered each week, including a *Shabbat and Me* hour presented each Friday, ensuring that the NBCL was literally “crawling” with children each weekday morning.

The children’s librarians focused similar attention on providing services to older children, in addition to the *Sunday Morning Story Hour*. During the 1980s and early 1990s many latchkey children frequented the library after school. These were chiefly children from working families who lived in the area, who attended the two adjacent Jewish day schools¹⁰. These students were a challenging population, as the library was not the best place to work off the energy they had built up after a long day in the classroom. In addition to offering homework help and traditional library information services, the staff developed activities for seven to twelve year-olds that included storytelling, puppetry, arts and crafts, cooking, drama and creative writing.¹¹ For many children these programs offered a creative outlet for their energies.

It was during these years that the children of the new wave of Russian immigrants spent their late weekday afternoons in the Children’s Library, waiting to be picked up by their parents. Initially they were dropped off at the Federation building after their integration classes, and needed a safe place to wait. Subsequently many of them attended the nearby schools. In addition to benefiting from homework help from the library staff, many of the after school programs helped integrate them into community life and develop their English language skills.¹² They especially enjoyed being introduced to the folk and fairy tales read to them by the librarian, evidenced by the strong attendance at these groups and positive feedback from their parents. They were also encouraged to use the library by their parents, for whom books and reading were extremely important. Home-schooled children also benefited from these programs, which gave them the opportunity to interact and socialize with other children while honing a new skill. After the turn of the century, the Children’s Library offered fewer organized after school activities because children were remaining in school longer each day, or participating in sport, ballet and other activities offered in their schools and elsewhere. Upper elementary and high school

students, chiefly those attending neighbouring schools, continued using the library for group study and work with tutors.

Staff participation in library conferences and workshops, as well as ongoing study of library literature, became a catalyst to developing new program ideas. One such experiment proved extremely successful and eventually led to expanded services for teenagers. The *Mother Daughter Book Club* for girls in grades five through seven began in the fall of 1998 and was modeled on a similar program begun two years earlier in the United States. The program was developed by mothers who wanted to open up lines of communication and strengthen relationships with their daughters through the discussion of issues raised in riveting and stimulating books. Animated by the Librarian, the *Mother Daughter* group proved such a success that after a number of years a second group was opened for those who had graduated to high school. At least once a year, the author of a book chosen for discussion appeared in person, adding an exciting perspective for the participants.

Not all programs proved successful, which prompted staff over the years to discover new ways of encouraging children and families to connect with the library. For example, an attempt to establish a father-son reading group did not find an audience. "Fathers generally bond with their sons through "guy" activities – sports, technology, adventure entertainment";³ and some libraries have established viable father-son book clubs, however the NBCL did not, in large part due to staff limitations, both in gender (finding the appropriate male animator) and time. Thus, the NBCL young male patrons *did* enjoy writing and craft programs, but the success of the mother daughter activity was not replicated among boys and their fathers. Another less than successful program was French language story time offered to preschool children and their families in the 1980s. Reading storybooks to young children was not as imbedded in the Sephardic culture as it was among Ashkenazi families, and these programs were primarily valued by non-Francophone parents wishing to improve their children's language skills. In this case a solution was found to ensure that Francophone children would become successful readers and lifelong learners. The library reached out to Sephardic day care centres by arranging weekly story sessions which were well attended from that time onwards. Furthermore, many young Sephardic mothers gradually learned about the library from the day care teachers and became active patrons. Day care enrollment eventually became the norm for children from *all* communities as more and more young mothers entered the work force. Story time sessions for schools, camp, and daycare centres were thereafter regularly offered in both English and French throughout the year. The NBCL staff considered flexibility to be a guiding principle in designing outreach programs and attempted, as much as possible, to both anticipate and meet the expressed needs of children and parents. As part of Federation CJA, the JPL's primary funding source, the Library also followed service guidelines set by the larger community. Thus over the past thirty years the focal

point for outreach programs shifted according to community priorities, targeting at different times services to immigrant communities (Sephardic, Russian, Argentinean); meeting the needs of physically and mentally handicapped children; outreach to the expanding West Island community; and engaging young adults.

Staff

It did not take long before additional staff became a compelling necessity. Multiplication of programs brought increased use of library materials (the desired outcome for all these activities) and the need for personnel to circulate the annual 20% increase of checkouts and check-ins; to conduct or organize the many activities, to purchase and catalogue new materials, and to help children, caregivers and educators find the resources required for school or recreation. An additional half time staff person, Debby Mayman, arrived in 1984, and was followed five years later by a new full time library assistant, Marielle Miller. Permanent part time staff members have over time also included Aviva Aziza, Shirley Olishansky, Sonia Smith and Janice Cohen. Budget cuts in recent years have since reduced the Children's staff by one half time position. In July, 2000, Penny Fransblow, whose background included experience as children's librarian of a large municipal library and as a school librarian, replaced Eva Raby, who became the Executive Director of the Jewish Public Library.

Despite these additions to permanent staff, the demand for increased programs, whether they came from the public or community guidelines, resulted in the hiring of additional, part time personnel. Several outstanding professionals have staffed the library's many activities over the years, led by Claire Berger in her seminal Sunday story hour and singer and musician, Sandy Kogut, whose *Music With Sandy* sessions were almost always over-subscribed. Upon Sandy's retirement¹⁴ new music and story programs, *Rhythm, Rhyme and Story Time*, *Mostly Music* and *Music & Movement* were implemented by early childhood educator and singer Linda Kravitz, whose background enabled her to counsel parents and children on parenting issues when called on. Selina Eisenberg, educator and storyteller, ably took over the infant and toddler programs previously led by Eva Raby. Furthermore, many writers, artists and educators, including puppeteer Ronit Klein, led activities that have inspired and challenged participants. These programs generated increased circulation of library materials so that part time student assistants, funded through normal budget lines and supplemented by government human resources grants (particularly summer grants), were hired to maintain service levels when the library was bursting at the seams.

Volunteers

Many of the parents who brought their children to the library's early childhood programs eventually formed strong ties to the institution and became its leaders and strongest supporters. As Penny Fransblow noted, "the parents who bring their families to the Norman Berman Children's Library not only introduce their children to a lifetime of learning, they also form their first links to the Jewish community as a whole."¹⁵ Several parents who brought their toddlers to story time went on to help the Jewish Public Library by serving on the Children's Library Committee as advisors and fundraisers. Others eventually become Board members, and members of the Executive. Two became Presidents of the JPL.¹⁶ Officials within Federation CJA were so convinced that the NBCL could help bring its services to the notice of young parents, that they strongly urged the Jewish Public Library to move the Children's Library to the ground level when Cummings House was renovated in 1999, so that children, parents, and community institutions could be visible to each other. The sight of babies, toddlers and young children clapping, singing, dancing and listening to stories was evidence of the community's vitality to the many volunteers who regularly strolled pass the Children's Activity Room; and for the young parents who brought their children into the building, this was an opportunity to encounter the Jewish institutions supported by Federation.

In understanding how the Norman Berman Children's Library has engaged multiple communities it is imperative to consider the role played by its Children's Library Committee, the final issue considered by the 1983 Children's Library Task Force. The Task Force had recommended that the Committee establish book selection and programming policies and develop fundraising initiatives and a volunteer corps to assist the professional staff in implementing these goals. It intended that that the Committee would promote the library in the community and recommend physical changes when required. Finally, the Task Force proposed that the Committee would prepare a detailed budget in conjunction with the professional staff and would be responsive to the ever-changing needs of the community.¹⁷ Ultimately, the Committee would be the entry point for parental involvement in the Jewish Public Library.

From 1983 to 2013, as chair persons and members of the Children's Library Committee worked to fulfill this mandate,¹⁸ they developed fundraising strategies and events, which they staffed, promoted and evaluated. Working together with the Librarian, they encouraged the expansion of programs in response to community needs and developed outstanding programs for parents. Thousands of dollars were raised to supplement the critical budgetary needs of the Children's Library, particularly during frequent cycles of budget cuts. Among the programs instituted and implemented by the Committee were the Birthday Book Club, through which parents commemorated their child's birthday by purchasing books and/or DVDs in their names¹⁹; a Sunday afternoon film series for school-aged students that in the years

before videocassettes and DVDs attracted scores of children each month; Sunday morning special events that included concerts, magic and puppet shows, children's theatre and special meet-the-author events later evolved into the Children's Entertainment Series that attracted hundreds of families to each event. These "entertainments" have included famed Montreal singer Ranee Lee and the McGill Conservatory Youth Choir, the Montreal Children's Theatre and singer Jennifer Gasoi, amongst others.

In 1995 and 1996 the Children's Library Committee sponsored two wildly successful Purim Carnivals. Until that time the Children's Library had celebrated Purim with a modest celebration as part of the Sunday morning program. By 1995 committee members became convinced that, like themselves, numerous Jewish families wanted to celebrate Purim in a setting other than a synagogue or school, and anticipated participation of some 200 children. For months prior to each event, members canvassed manufacturers and retailers for prizes, food, decorations and miscellaneous "goodies"; they organized and directed dozens of games; they distributed fliers and they sold tickets at the event. The response, however, was so overwhelming as to prove almost disastrous: 700 children and adults showed up in the JPL auditorium, causing one committee member to become physically ill from the "crush." The event proved similarly successful in 1996, with advance ticket sales ensuring that the attendance was within permissible limits. By 1997, however, other Jewish organizations, led by Chabad, were hosting community Purim carnivals in public spaces, and the Children's Library resumed the more limited celebrations of earlier years.

Equally popular proved to be the five successive annual Bingo Fundraisers, 1992-1996. Committee members successfully solicited prizes; most food was donated and they recruited and supervised high school students to run around on the night of the event. The committee also organized the rental of "boutique" tables to various entrepreneurs who sold their wares at the event. One Committee member, a radio personality in her former life, acted as emcee, and another packaged and oversaw the distribution of the hundreds of prizes involved. Ultimately, it was too mammoth an effort for such a small group of volunteers to sustain, and the committee turned to less labour-intensive projects. In recent years participants from the *Mother Daughter Book Club* have planned and helped implement the annual *Girls Night Out* event, a "happening" that combined a unique author visit with a meet-and-greet opportunity that raised funds for the purchase of young adult materials. Authors of young adult literature addressed teenaged girls and their mothers, grandmothers, aunts and female friends at a gala evening featuring prizes, book giveaways, and fanciful food and beverages.²⁰ Almost everything was donated. The authors spoke from their deepest memories and convictions as they shared their intimate stories and encouraged readers and budding writers to persevere. The atmosphere was and continues to be electric as participants come away deeply moved and inspired.²¹

One volunteer initiative, developed and implemented over many years by psychiatrist Dr. Ellen Clavier, focused on helping parents through a "series of discussions on topical issues to inform and support [the] concerned parent."²² Children's librarians occupy a unique position of trust for children and parents, who view them as neutral authority figures to whom they can turn when facing difficult parenting or school issues.²³ Thus, when JPL patrons turned to their librarians for information and advice, the Children's Library Committee created a program to meet this need. Dr. Clavier enlisted the aid of physicians, educators, social workers and other committed professionals to help parents deal with a variety of issues. Inaugurated in 1993 as *Parenting in the 90's*, it continued under a different name after the year 2000²⁴ and dealt with topics as varied as early childhood education, coping with death, childhood illnesses, discipline, sibling rivalry, substance abuse, homework help, reading with children, fire prevention, the stress of parenting, and even what to do with your children during the summer vacation.²⁵ In conjunction with this series, a "Parent's Corner" featuring books, videos, and pamphlets was established in the Children's Library to support patron parenting information needs.

Physical and Virtual Spaces

During the past thirty years, the physical space of the Children's Library has undergone a series of incarnations in order to accommodate the changing and growing needs of collections, services and staff. More recently, we have seen the rapid evolution of information technology that has propelled the library into virtual spaces that can accommodate the new ways in which people access information. The Children's Library Task Force recognized that the cramped quarters in the basement of Cummings House would not serve children and families for long. Even as the circulation of books and attendance at programs increased month by month, plans were already underway to restructure the facility. Towards the end of August, 1983, 240 square feet were carved out of the Annexe²⁶ and added to the library. Within a few days shelving was moved to the new space at the rear of the library, so that much of the library had an airier, brighter look. A welcoming corner where preschoolers could gather was created and study desks were moved to be closer to library staff. Finally, the staff work area was reorganized to provide a better work flow.²⁷ The changes delighted everyone, but did not prove adequate for long.

By May 15, 1986 the new space was bursting at the seams.²⁸ The number of staff members had grown to one full time and two half time positions, with additional shelving assistants helping out on Sundays and weekday afternoons. Volunteers who assisted with routine book processing, mending and typing further cramped the work quarters, as did the addition of a full time library assistant in 1989. Further crowding was caused by ever-expanding collections, increased programs, and new borrowers. In the eight years since the Task Force was implemented, circulation of materials had increased by at least 20% every year and, as noted in a speech delivered by a librarian

at the opening on the renovated Children's Library in 1990, "a dream fulfilled became a nightmare: long lines at the circulation desk, wall to wall children on Sundays, children crawling over other toddlers in the picture book area, older students searching for seating space, frazzled library staff members tripping over each other in cramped working space."²⁹ The enlargement and renovation of the Children's Library took place over three months in 1990 and reopened in November with a festive ceremony attended by community and library leaders, and library supporters, followed by an open house a few days later. The expanded facility tripled the picture book area for toddlers and new spaces were created for the reference collection, computers, journals, and the new and growing audio and video collections. Storage space was created in the Children's Activity Room to accommodate the ever-growing collection of storytelling books and props, musical instruments, and arts and craft supplies. A customized circulation desk helped control the flow of people and books coming in and out of the library and the expanded staff area enabled the librarians to work in a happier atmosphere. The new quarters ensured that there would be continued and unabated growth in library use over the years that followed. This was confirmed when statistics for materials checked out for 1990–1991 reflected a 13% annual increase in circulated materials despite the three month closure.

The renovated space, created through a close working relationship between the architect, designers and the library staff worked exceptionally well for users and staff until 8 February 1999. This was the date when the Jewish Public Library, along with all the tenants of Cummings House, closed its doors to prepare for the temporary move to Cavendish Mall in suburban Côte Saint-Luc while the building underwent a complete renovation. Six weeks later, after packing up over 6,000 boxes of materials for either relocation or storage, the Library reopened on 15 March on the ground level of the Mall, in space formerly occupied by a major department store. For the following seven months, the Children's Library operated on an almost normal basis, having taken all its preschool books, paperback and beginning reader collections and selected Judaic materials. All the preschool programs were offered and actually benefited from the temporary move as parents enjoyed having easy parking facilities and a convenient location. The unexpected success of the early childhood programs in the temporary location underscored the fact that the JPL's established home in the Federation building, far from the majority of young Jewish families, and with poor parking facilities, was a challenging location for successful outreach to the community.

Library service to the public once again ceased from October 1999 through February 2000 while the community institutions moved back to Cummings House, new furnishings were installed and 6,000 boxes were unpacked and re-shelved. The Children's Library reopened to an entirely new vista. In response to requests from the community to place the Children's Library in a more visible location, the NBCL was relocated to the main level of the building in sunny new quarters overlooking a garden. The new Children's Activity Room, adjacent to the corridor leading from

Cummings House to the new Gelber Conference Centre, had glass windows, which enabled all who walked by to enjoy babies and toddlers participating in story and music. Although everyone was delighted to be back "home," in fresh new quarters, the new facility unfortunately had much less space than the renovated lower level vacated the year before. Many of the former issues that had earlier plagued the staff now reemerged, namely, cramped quarters for users, staff and materials. The collections had to be weeded and continually rearranged during the following years and there was minimal seating space to attract older children. On a more positive note, a major benefit of the relocation was the merger of the main library and children's circulation desks, increasing service hours to children and families by 17 hours to 54 hours a week.

Not until 2007 were physical changes to the Children's Library again undertaken, the result of an unfortunate event. Mould was discovered in the JPL Archives in 2005 forcing it to be closed, emptied, cleaned up and renovated. Although the Archives were situated on the lower level of the building, its ventilation system was interconnected with the Children's Library, which also had to be closed and decontaminated. Once entire areas of the Library were forced to empty and renovate, the Library administration resolved to use the opportunity to restructure the entire facility in two stages to correct many inefficiencies that had emerged since the building's renovation. A completely redesigned and restructured children's space was reopened in the fall of 2007. As the Librarian noted in the JPL's 2008 annual report, "the Library's redesigned, user-friendly features demonstrate how renovation can mean innovation."³⁰ Library staff moved closer to users for improved service; shelving was carefully rearranged to feature little known collections and better accommodate users; open floor space now encouraged children to play, discover books and admire the outside garden views; seating was expanded for student study space and computer access. In short, the children's library once again became a welcoming place for children and their families.

In time, the JPL began to occupy virtual spaces. The library was automated in 1995 and in 2003 launched an upgraded Web Gateway, through which the public could interact with the library online. Library automation altered the ways in which patrons used library resources. Since much of the information that students required could be accessed through the Internet, researchers sought assistance from professionals in navigating the bewildering mass of information available and in establishing the provenance of the data they found. Through the JPL website, patrons could access the library catalogue and online data bases such as periodical indexes and specialized Jewish sources. They could ask reference questions, request books or register their preschoolers in programs from home. Informative articles provided by the Children's Librarian now appear – and are read – on the JPL's Facebook page, weekly blogs generated by the JPL Archives and the main library. Plans are underway to generate a separate NBCL newsletter, and to ultimately offer an eBook collec-

tion. Indeed, budget restrictions are the only obstacles to augmenting the Library's presence in the virtual world.

Collections

At the core of the NBCL lie the diverse collections through which children, parents, and educators can discover their Jewish heritage, explore the world around them, and fill their leisure hours with the dreams, ideas and laughter generated by the imaginations of outstanding writers and filmmakers. The materials selection policy of the Children's Library has always been the inverse of the main library, which is 75% Judaic and 25% general, although the 25% Judaic content of the NBCL collection is comprehensive in scope. From the very beginning, the library's policy with regard to children's collections has emphasized the acquisition of educational and recreational materials, while ensuring full Judaic content. While adult patrons could readily access other Montreal libraries, it was felt that children should be able to find all their reading and informational requirements at the Jewish Public Library. The children's collections have been multilingual, formed of book and non-book materials and have responded to shifting community priorities.

The Task Force of 1983 had no issue with the core collection of children's books, but it did recommend expansion of the periodical and audio-visual collections. The rapid increase in library use that followed the augmentation of library hours and programming, however, resulted in a dramatic strain on existing resources. The first order of business, in response to the influx of preschool children, was to increase the number of picture and board books. These same children so "devoured" their favourite classics, that over the years it became necessary to replace entire sections. The success of after school programs, the increase in latchkey children seeking homework help, and the enhanced publication of wonderful works of non-fiction, contributed to the expansion of the non-fiction sections.³¹ Parents bringing their toddlers to programs and teachers accompanying their students on class visits created a demand for Jewish holiday materials and Jewish folktales. Each of these areas expanded as well, as did the number of titles purchased in French, in response to the needs of the growing Sephardic community, the community's prioritization of enhanced services to this community and the realities of an increasingly bilingual Montreal. The French language paperback collection, a format that children found appealing and readable, has been especially important to this readership by encouraging them to read more broadly in that language. The parenting collection, as mentioned earlier in this paper, was also developed in response to the needs of parents and educators. Hebrew language materials, fiction in particular, were purchased in greater numbers in response to the needs of the Jewish schools and the demands of the growing Israeli community. It became a challenge, however, to find adequate high interest/low level texts to match the Hebrew reading skills of most students. In the late 1980s it became

evident that the immigration of Jews from the Soviet Union was bringing with it an enthusiastic Russian readership. Russian became the unofficial fifth language of the Library, although the children's Russian collection remained modest due to budget restrictions and the children's rapid acquisition of, and comfort with, English and French. Only the Yiddish collection remained static, despite the Library's mandate to purchase all Yiddish language materials, as so few books were being published in that language, especially for children.

The Children's Library was always heavily used by the Orthodox communities, for whom reading was a chief source of recreation, and for whom television was prohibited. Until the 1990s Orthodox fiction was poorly written and edited and did not meet library selection standards. However, the quality of these publications steadily improved in the 1990s, and the library has added this growing body of literature to its collections accordingly. The librarians attempted to build a balanced collection within its budget restrictions and to meet the needs of patrons who came from every sector of society. These policies were at times challenged when some Orthodox parents questioned the purchase of sex education materials, or books dealing with same sex parents. These titles remained in the collection to meet the requirements of families who were dealing with these issues.

The rapid proliferation of audio visual materials that began in the 1980s was a continual challenge to the library's budget line, and provoked continual readjustments to its acquisition policies. Investments in audio tapes were scrapped in favour of the compact discs that superseded them. Similarly, video cassettes³², of which there were hundreds, gave way to DVDs in the new millennium. Other collections were created over the decades in response to the needs of the time, only to be discarded when new technologies appeared, among them filmstrips (for use during story time) and audiotape/book kits. Space limitations, as well as the inherent obsolescence of information books and fads in fiction, have resulted in ongoing weeding of the collection. Librarians have had to ensure that collections were relevant. The launch of the Hubble Space Telescope in 1990, for example, and the discoveries that followed, made books about space published prior to that date redundant. Geography sections have similarly become outdated following various political reconfigurations. The renovation of an entire section adjacent to the Children's Library was necessitated by the outpouring of books for young adults (teenagers) that followed the publication of the Harry Potter series, and which have attracted a devoted readership. Similarly the Librarian has responded to the explosive growth and popularity of graphic novels by swiftly expanding this collection. These titles – such as adapted Shakespeare – circulate wildly and appeal to children who might otherwise not read a book.

In contrast to larger and more administratively cumbersome municipal libraries, the NBCL staff can respond quickly to changing needs and will consequently discuss, research, plan and implement a new program or collection in a rapid manner. Ulti-

mately, the past thirty years have seen the NBCL collection more than double, to its current size of close to 30,000 items.

Engaging multiple communities

The Jewish Public Library has always taken seriously the “public” aspect of its name. Because the Children’s Library is focused on meeting all the needs of its patrons – cultural, informational and recreational – it has always been relevant to children from every community, in particular neighbouring families and schools. However, because of its location inside the Federation building, the JPL is not always visible to passersby and not always known outside the community. The NBCL made attempts to publicize the facility by organizing open houses and intergenerational family days every two or three years and to offer a “taste” of the library, with modest success. The Library has been more effective by working closely with educators and cultural institutions to present events that have made the library well known and have contributed to its growth.

The best known and longest running event has been the annual Jewish Book Month program organized for the Jewish community by the Norman Berman Children’s Library. From 1983, when popular children’s author Johanna Hurwitz spoke to a few hundred children, to the present, when authors address thousands of students over several days, tens of thousands of children have been inspired by the top Jewish writers of their day. Initially these events were offered to older elementary school classes from the Jewish day school system. Within a few short years, however, more than one speaker was invited each year so that students from kindergarten through high school could benefit from immediate contact with their favourite writer. The program was also extended to Jewish afternoon schools, and when possible to students in local non Jewish public and private schools. Not only Jewish authors, but also illustrators of Jewish books and professional Jewish storytellers thrilled, entertained and inspired their audiences.³³ These speakers spoke up to four times a day over several days, sometimes at the Jewish Public Library, at other times at various schools around the city. Although the speakers found these visits challenging and exhausting, they were uplifted by their appreciative audiences.

Whenever possible, the authors and storytellers presented workshops for teachers and librarians during their visit, inspiring participants with innovative ideas to engage children with literature.³⁴ In order to ensure that children in every grade could celebrate Jewish stories, Eva Raby, in storytelling mode, would frequently visit schools and day care centres throughout Montreal during Jewish Book Month and at other times of the year.

The Jewish Book Month visits and workshops were organized by the Children’s Librarian, who engaged the speaker and coordinated school visits with the various

school librarians. Although the JPL's primary clientele was the Jewish community, over the years the Librarian also reached out to local public and private schools. In particular all schools were encouraged to bring their students to author visits arranged through Canada Council grants. These grants, contingent on the JPL serving the broader community, made it possible for children to meet many noted Canadian children's authors³⁵, many of them in intimate settings that inspired budding young writers. There have been many such author visits co-sponsored with other organizations.³⁶ In 2008 the noted Montreal literary festival, Blue Metropolis, developed a series of programs for children, whereby children's authors spoke at libraries throughout the city. The largest audiences each year have gathered at the JPL. Seven hundred students from eleven Montreal area schools stream into Cummings House annually to hear children's authors from Canada and around the world.³⁷ Such partnerships have enabled the JPL to fulfill the public aspect of its mandate. As an independent, primarily English-speaking, public library, the JPL is supported through grants from the Borough, Canada Council and from time to time from such institutions as the McConnell Family Foundation; whenever possible, therefore, the library works to bring meaningful cultural encounters to the broader community.

As part of its mission and mandate, the NBCL librarians also shared their professional expertise with educational and cultural institutions on how to connect families and children with literature, on storytelling techniques, and in Judaic resources. They did so through presentations at educational conferences, meetings with local area day schools and workshops at local, national and international library association events. In 1986 and 2011 Montreal hosted the annual Association of Jewish Librarians Conference and each time members of the Children's Library staff presented well-received hands-on workshops to school and synagogue librarians. In conjunction with the *Planets, Potions and Parchments Exhibition*, organized together with the David M. Stewart Museum in 1990 to celebrate the JPL's 75th anniversary, the Children's Librarian commissioned educational materials to accompany class visits to the exhibit.³⁸ During the six months of this exhibit, which featured scientific Judaic artifacts, the Children's Librarian visited schools on and off the Island of Montreal, presenting a slide show and education kits that would prepare children for their visit. It was an occasion of vast exposure for the JPL.

In 2000 the Children's Librarian was asked to coordinate a Young Authors' Workshop with the Association of Jewish Day Schools and the Bronfman Education Resource Centre. That year, and for nine years to follow, approximately 200-300 children from 14 Jewish day schools attended one day of a two day writing workshop. They were taught writing skills by renowned Canadian and American children's authors. This was a mammoth project, involving contract and travel arrangements for the authors, supervised lunchtime activities, finding comfortable work areas, assigning students to workshops, and organizing a festive evening and book sale where the authors

shared personal confidences with students and their families. Students were selected by each of their schools and worked hard at their writing to be chosen to go. This was a successful cooperative project for the three institutions, though not all attempts to coordinate efforts were as fortunate. Regretfully, attempts by the community to coordinate the automation of library resources with the Jewish day schools never came to fruition, each institution choosing its own automated system. Ultimately the JPL catalogue became accessible to all when the JPL Web Gateway was launched in 2003, a goal that all the institutions involved had long sought.

The Norman Berman Children's Library has in recent years celebrated such community events as Family Literacy Day and the Global Day of Jewish Learning with special events. The NBCL also exported a taste of its cultural programming with the production of two audio cassettes/CDs. 10 April 1989 saw the launch of *Tunes 'N Tales* with Sandy Kogut and Eva Raby, featuring the songs, finger plays and stories that delighted the toddlers attending their weekly programs. Six years later, on 12 March 1995, they launched *Kinder Klängen; Yiddish holiday and Play Songs for Children...of all ages*. Accompanied by a song-lyric booklet, it was produced with financial assistance provided by a grant from Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada. We were told that countless children refused to get out of their cars because Eva and Sandy were still inside, singing!

From 2009 to 2013 the NBCL implemented and managed the PJLibrary project in Montreal on behalf of the Montreal Jewish Community's GenJ initiative. This project, initiated by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation of the United States, which sends free Jewish Books to Jewish families, is especially designed to connect less affiliated families to their heritage and to the broader community. A complementary collection of PJLibrary books was made available to the general public at the NBCL, and many programs for PJ families were organized under the supervision of its Librarian. We note that in all the projects outlined above, the JPL has been turned to by the community for its expertise and leadership in library and cultural matters.

As the Jewish Public Library approaches its centennial, it is evident that its Children's Library plays an important role in Jewish communal life. It is here, through discovery of Jewish resources, children's literature and music and through interaction of patrons and staff, that young parents and their families explore their cultural heritage and connect to one another. Moreover, they do so in the building that is the central address for the Montreal Jewish Community. In attempting to fulfill its mission, which is underscored by its name – Jewish/Public/Library – the Children's Library seeks to engage the Jewish and wider communities through cultural programs, diverse collections and dedicated, professional staff; to facilitate learning; to engage the minds, hearts and imaginations of children; and to participate in community efforts to ensure an active, enriched, cultural life.

The NBCL has a mascot, twenty one year-old Shelley the Turtle, who welcomes her delighted young friends with wild splashes each morning. It is a noisy place, where families are welcomed by people who have their interests at heart and by a setting made bright and beautiful by its design and content. The socialization made possible by this physical space and the programs that educate and entertain children foster these families' first connections to each other and to community. When it snows outside, or late at night when an urgent project is remembered, patrons can touch base on a virtual level as well! A community of parents created this special place and generations of children have delighted in it. This is the foundation for *their* children to build on in the next hundred years.³⁹

1

Report of the Norman Berman Children's Library Task Force, March 1983, 2. Michael Rosenberg, Chair.

2

Ibid., 1.

3

Recollection of a grateful donor to the author in 2005, who credits books found at the JPL with sparking his life-long interest in electronics.

4

The author of this paper.

5

Discussed in the following paragraph.

6

Greene, Ellin, *Books, Babies and Libraries; Serving Infants and Toddlers, Their Parents and Caregivers* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1991), 1.

7

Ibid., 7-8.

8

August 1983.

9

Sandy Kogut began her long association with the NBCL in 1987.

10

Jewish People's and Peretz School, Van Horne branch, and United Talmud Torah, St-Kevin Street branch.

11

Good readers often want to become writers, and over the years hundreds of children flourished in the *Creative Writers Workshop*, which was led at various times by author Yvette Mintzberg, educator Shirley Olishansky and writer Andrew Katz. Several participants even had their works published in magazines for young people, and the program was twice featured by articles in the *Montreal Gazette* (e.g. March 15, 1999).

12

They attended government French immersion courses during the day.

13

Soltan, Rita, *Reading Raps: a Book Club Guide for Librarians, Kids and Families* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Libraries Unlimited, 2006), 169.

14

2007.

15

Fransblow, Penny, "Report of the Norman Berman Children's Library" *Jewish Public Library Annual Report* (2005).

16

Daniel Lighter, 2000-2003; Joanne Garfinkle, 2003-2005.

17

Report of the Norman Berman Children's Library Task Force, March 1983, *op cit*, 8.

18

Chairpersons over the years have included

Anne Kalles, Shirley Gonshor, Florence Mitmaker, Maureen Kramer, Francine Nelson Wiseman, Joanne Laing-Zairi, Cindy Bercovitch, Joanne Garfinkle and Bonnie Faigenbaum.

19

Incredibly, a group of Bat Mitzvah girls raised \$3,000 in 1997 by requesting that donations to the NBCL be made in lieu of gifts.

20

Sarah Mlynowski, Lauren Myracle, Libba Bray, Robin Friedman, Jordana Fraiberg, Sara Sheppard, Ally Carter, Lauren Kate, Lauren Oliver.

21

2011 was a typical year: "...it has become an annual, irresistible, anticipated event for adolescent girls and their moms, sisters, grandmothers and aunts....Ally Carter...easily won the crowd over with her warmth, wisdom and vivaciousness on and off stage." *Jewish Public Library Annual Report, 2012*, 10.

22

Norman Berman Children's Library, Jewish Public Library, *Parenting in the 90's brochure*, cover.

23

Lundin, Anne, *Constructing the Canon of Children's Literature: Beyond Library Walls* (London: Routledge, 2004), 2.

24

Parenting in the New Millenium.

25

Ibid., 1994-95. With Sandra Phillips, author of *Smart Shopping*, *Montreal Gazette* columnist and radio contributor, June 12, 1995.

26

Which housed the Children's Activity Room.

27

Eva Raby, *Progress Report on the Norman Berman Children's Library, January - September, 1983*, 1.

28

The cramped situation and recommendations for improvement are reported by Eva Raby, Shirley Gonshor and Sue Carol Isaacson in the Report of the Subcommittee on the Children's Library to the Jewish Public Library Long Range Planning Committee, May 15, 1986.

29

Eva Raby, speech delivered at the official opening of the renovated Children's Library, November, 1990.

30

Fransblow, Penny, *Jewish Public Library Annual Report, 2008*.

31

Curiously, current library staff now plucks sections of the non-fiction collection from their classification locations and relocates them in different library areas in order to highlight selected topics and make information books more visibly enticing. This activity has been dubbed 'loose Dewey'.

32

The first purchases were made in 1986/87.

33

Among the many outstanding authors and illustrators to appear were Johanna Hurwitz, Barbara Cohen, Marilyn Hirsch, Carol Snyder, David Adler, Amy Schwartz, Yaffa Ganz, Caroline Feller Bauer, Eric Kimmel, Esther Hautzig, Giora Carmi, Sonia Levitin, Jacqueline Dembar Greene, Phoebe Gilman, Aubrey Davis, Carol Matas, Sheldon Oberman, Hiroki Sugihara, Joanne Rocklin, Barbara Diamond Goldin, Gordon Korman, Gail Carson Levine, Fran Manushkin, Frieda Wishinsky, Neil Waldman, and Susie Morgenstern. Equally outstanding were storytellers Robin Goldberg, Penninah Schram, Dalia Friedland, Nina Jaffe and Diane Wolkstein..

34

Among the most successful workshops were those led by Johanna Hurwitz, Barbara Cohen, Caroline Feller Bauer and Pat Carfra ("The Lullabye Lady").

35

Monica Hughes, Camilla Gryski, Carol Matas, Barbara Reid, Kenneth Opper, Ian Wallace, Cary Fagen, Jacques Shore, Richard Scrimger, Linda Holeman, Marie Louise Gay, Hazel Hutchins, Laura Langston, Sara Ellis, and Sonia Serfati, who spoke to francophone children.

36

Historian Milton Meltzer's visit was co-sponsored by the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre.

37

e.g. John Boyne and Anne Fine from Ireland and England, respectively. One father, from a native community outside Montreal, actually pulled his daughter out of school so that she would have the opportunity to meet her favourite author at the JPL!

38

These materials were prepared by educator Miriam Cohen.

39

Further resources for this paper include: Jewish Public Library, Montreal, *Annual reports, 1982 – 2013*; Norman Berman Children's Library, 1978 – 2012, *Minutes of the Children's Library Committee, 1982 – 1997* and *Report of the Norman Berman Children's Library Task Force*, March, 1983; Caruso, Naomi, ed. *Folk's Lore; a History of the Jewish Public Library 1914-1989* (Montreal, Jewish Public Library, 1989).