

Jewish Women's Center, Squirrel Hill Health Center honored by local Islamic organization

By **TOBY TABACHNICK**

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The Jewish Women's Center was honored on June 11 by the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh. From left: Malke Frank, Julie Webb, Laura Horowitz, Barbara Baumann, Pat Cluss and Niama Elharrak (Photo by Jeffrey Herman)

The Islamic Center of Pittsburgh bestowed awards to two organizations established by members of the Jewish community at its Humanity Day Award Ceremony on June 11.

The Jewish Women's Center of Pittsburgh and the Squirrel Hill Health Center joined four other honorees at the outreach event, which is held annually, usually during the month of Ramadan.

The Jewish Women's Center, which has been engaged in interfaith events with Muslim women since 2013, was nominated for the Humanity Award by Julie Webb, the former outreach coordinator for the Islamic Center.

The JWC of Pittsburgh is a nonprofit organization that began in the early 1990s as a Jewish feminist group, "at a time when the idea of a Miriam's cup at the seder table was either relatively unknown or new," said Malke Frank, one of the founders of the JWC and chair of its board. "A lot has happened in that period of time. Here we are on another path in our journey as Jewish women."

That path is leading the women of the JWC to build relationships with women of other backgrounds, according to Frank.

To foster understanding of "each other's different faith traditions while celebrating our interconnectedness," members of the JWC reached out to Webb three years ago to explore the possibility of coming together for a joint Jewish/Muslim woman potluck event, Webb wrote in an email.

Following the success of that event, “the JWC invited us to our first all-women’s seder, the Passover story told from a women’s perspective,” Webb continued. “And so began several annual social events planned by the members of the Jewish Women’s Center and Kelcey [Sharkas] of the [Islamic Center’s] outreach team.”

The collaborative events have deepened the understanding of the two groups of women regarding each other’s values and rituals.

“We are always amazed by the similarities of our traditions and our words,” said Frank.

“We are very honored to receive this award,” Frank added. “It’s very rewarding and very special. I feel very blessed I’ve had the opportunity to meet Muslim women and they have met us. The fact that this network of Jewish and Muslim women exists gives our daughters and granddaughters a model to show them what’s possible.”

The Squirrel Hill Health Center, established by the Jewish Healthcare Foundation in 2006 to provide high-quality health services to underserved populations, with a focus on immigrants and refugees, also was honored by the Islamic Center for its good work in both its Squirrel Hill and Brentwood facilities, said Sharkas.

“The Squirrel Hill Health Center is an amazing connection for us,” she said. “There are so many people coming to us — lower income families — needing help from our community, and we are able to connect them with the Squirrel Hill Health Center to get the health care and help they need.”

Susan Friedberg Kalson, CEO of the SHHC, noted the “extensive work” the SHHC has done with “patients of all backgrounds and all faith traditions.”

“In the last 11 years, we have served many patients who are Muslim, from all different backgrounds, while taking into account their beliefs,” Kalson said. “Many beliefs of Muslims are shared in common with our Jewish patients, like issues of modesty and having a preference for a clinician of the same gender.”

The SHHC is also aware of the limited English language skills of many of its patients and uses “intensive interpretation services,” hiring translators from the patient populations that it serves, Kalson said. “Our staff is as diverse as our patients.”

“It’s a delight to be honored, and our board is thrilled,” she continued. “It’s a testament to the good work we do to break down the barriers to individuals getting good health care and the respect our patients have for our work.”

The other recipients of the Humanity Award were: the American Civil Liberties Union, greater Pittsburgh chapter; Betty Cruz, director of the Change Agency; the Community Empowerment Association; and Kenyon Bonner, vice provost and dean of students at the University of Pittsburgh.

Toby Tabachnick can be reached at toby@thejewishchronicle.net.

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