

Amplifying Our Philanthropy

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College basketball might not leap to mind as a natural way to engage younger donors in Jewish philanthropy. But Matthew Kramer-Morning, Young Leadership campaign director for the [United Jewish Federation of Tidewater, Virginia](#), realized last Spring, while working with lay leader Danny Rubin, that such a [competition could be a springboard](#) to entice young adults to join a giving circle, an increasingly popular way for people to pool their resources and then make collective decisions about what nonprofit organizations to support. Working with an existing men's group, he charged \$54 for dues and then encouraged the group to move in a philanthropic direction, empowering them to decide collectively how to allocate both the contest and dues money to existing federation agencies.

A [pathbreaking 2009 study](#) led by Angela M. Eikenberry and Jessica Bearman discovered that when people participate in giving circles, they give at higher amounts, are more intentional about their giving, and engage more deeply with their communities.

[Amplifier](#), powered by The Jewish Federations of North America, has grown and informed the giving circle movement in this country. Our mission is to offer accessible on-ramps to giving that are rooted in Jewish values. Inspired by the centrality of community building in Jewish life, we [envision a world](#) in which everyone has the opportunity to create change through collaborative giving.

The majority of giving circles are rooted in shared identity, with women's circles being the most common. Amplifier works with Jewish giving circles, which bring participants into more meaningful relationships with Jewish values and giving as an expression of those values. Jewish federations sponsor more than a dozen such circles, and are finding them to be a strikingly effective model for donor engagement, education, stewardship and leadership development and for engaging the community in innovative ways.

For example, the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta recently engaged the adult children of prominent donors in a [NextGen giving circle](#) that solidified their continuing investment in the community and prepared them for positions of leadership. One young leader, Brittany Nehman, had never done any giving in a group format before she got involved with the giving circle. "I found it so powerful to choose a beneficiary of our giving through these conversations with my peers," she said

As a result of her participation, Nehman noted, “I had a pathway for conversations with my own parents and grandparents about their giving and how they see the values of our family and of Judaism reflected in their philanthropic priorities.” Nehman then opened her own donor-advised fund at the beginning of this year.

Similarly, the Jewish Pride Fund based at [the Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund of San Francisco](#) used the relationship and community building power of giving circles to engage LGBTQ donors and support members’ leadership, bringing a broader diversity of voices into the federation system. For example, one member joined the board and another became a federation fellow, a program that trains young adults for federation leadership by placing them on the boards of other Jewish agencies in the community.

Giving Circles have been equally transformative for the Jewish Federation of Greater Phoenix (now the Center for Jewish Philanthropy (CJP), as the Federation and Jewish Community Foundation have recently integrated), where the [NowGen Program encourages young Jewish people to “live Jewishly, give Jewishly, and lead Jewishly.”](#) Johnny Basha and Blaine Light started their own giving circle under the auspices of NowGen. Through the social connections that they had developed through living together in the Moishe House in Scottsdale, they were able to bring lots of young people into the program.

Their peers were attracted to the entrepreneurial concept of “decentralized giving” and the opportunity to form a closer relationship with their beneficiaries, meeting face-to-face with potential grantees and then deciding as a group where to give or invest. In previous years, with staff support from federation, the group decided to give to both local and Israeli causes, such as for a refrigerator for a local food bank, a series of programs for local Jews with special needs, and a Shabbat retreat for Moishe House.

We couldn’t agree more with Nancy Greer, CEO of the Seattle Jewish Federation, who [posted on her blog](#) last July that the NowGen Giving Circle in her community, which was modeled on the one in Phoenix, “proved its value in bringing the new ideas and fresh energy of up-and-coming leaders to community leadership.”

The program, she added, “perfectly exemplifies the Jewish value of *hitlamdut* — openness to learning, willingness to innovate, striving for continuous improvement, and nurturing of creativity that will ensure a vibrant future for Jewish life.”

According to Andrew Gibbs, who directs NowGen for the CJP in Phoenix, former participants in giving circles have gone on to be involved and informed leaders in federation and in other organizations throughout the Jewish community, both locally and nationally. Giving circles offer, he reflected, “the opportunity to be part of an allocation process from start to finish. This gives participants a sense of ownership and investment in the community.”

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For more information on launching a giving circle visit amplifiergiving.org