



Alan Siskind

## **Alan Siskind: A Life of Service**

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As Alan Siskind retires from the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services (JBFCS) after more than 33 years of service and 16 years as executive vice president and CEO, he leaves an enduring legacy. Under Alan's leadership, JBFCS developed a richly deserved reputation as both a high-quality professional training institution and a model of innovation, compassion, and collaboration across the fields of human service. Building on the foundation that Alan and his colleagues have created, JBFCS will continue to flourish long after Alan's retirement. At least one reason for that continued success is clear—Alan led by mentoring. In practicing a form of leadership that empowers, he provided his staff and volunteers with the tools and confidence that will enable JBFCS to tackle the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. And he accomplished this with his humor intact and without betraying the sensitivity and modesty that reflect his years as a clinician.

There are many ways one could write a tribute to Alan. One could focus on those he touched directly, such as the young teen who sought guidance when Alan was the assistant director of JBFCS's Linden Hill School in 1973 and now, his life on track, calls Alan frequently "just to check in." One could write about how Alan led JBFCS to deal head-on with AIDS when it first emerged in the 1980s and then with domestic violence, when many others said, "These aren't our issues." One could write about how JBFCS has grown to serve 65,000 New Yorkers annually through a comprehensive range of 185 community-based programs,

residential facilities, and day treatment centers.

But I also write this tribute from my perch as the executive vice president and CEO of UJA-Federation of New York. As such, I want to focus on how Alan expressed his commitment to the unique needs of the Jewish community while never losing sight of the needs of the broader community.

### **STRENGTHENING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY**

Recognizing that often a stigma in the Jewish community is attached to those who seek counseling in coping with addictions and other psychological issues, Alan led JBFCS to create its Jewish Connections Division, a constellation of programs and services designed to respond to the specific needs of Jewish individuals and families. These programs include JACS Teens (Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependent Persons, and Significant Others), which serves Jewish teens who are either in recovery from alcohol or other substance abuse or are concerned about the problem as it affects their friends and loved ones; the Shira Ruskay Center, part of UJA-Federation's Jewish Healing and Hospice Alliance, a program that allows terminally ill patients and their families to access support and healing; and the Genesis Project, which provides support for single-parent families.

Alan guided JBFCS in making human services available in the places where people naturally gather. For example, JBFCS's groundbreaking Partners in Caring initiative brings JBFCS social workers into synagogues, where they run programs

designed for the needs of the specific congregation. Alan has also sought to develop satellite mental health clinics in Jewish Community Centers. If people need help, they need not walk through the doors of a clinic—JBFCS now provides services in places where they are comfortable.

### **REACHING OUT TO ALL NEW YORKERS**

Although Alan's commitment to strengthening the Jewish community is deep, he has always recognized that the future of our community requires collaborations with the entire New York community. At UJA-Federation, we repeatedly say that our Jewish values and interests lead us to care both for our own community and for all New Yorkers in need. Alan led JBFCS to actualize these dual commitments both in its program offerings and through his personal leadership throughout New York. Alan served as past president of the Coalition of Voluntary Mental Health Agencies, board chair of the Human Services Council of New York City, and president of the American Association of Children's Residential Centers. In these and other settings, he was the voice of the Jewish community, sharing his expertise and providing wisdom for the benefit of all New Yorkers.

It was this spirit of interagency collaboration and innovative thinking that proved pivotal in the harrowing days after 9/11. JBFCS was able to take charge of the trauma-relief effort, offering services to tens of thousands of New Yorkers. Why was JBFCS so well prepared? Since 1995, JBFCS has stood at the forefront on the issue of trauma, developing a highly regarded core competency in the area. With the knowledge gained over these 6 years, JBFCS was able to quickly mobilize and help a wounded city heal. JBFCS became one of the lynchpin agencies in UJA-Federation's binational Israel Trauma Coalition, formed in response to the *intifada* and involved in extending help to victims of the South Asian tsunami and the Beslan children's massacre.

JBFCS's trauma efforts did not end there. Alan has also led the effort to study trauma as it relates to the issue of race. He established a multicultural task force and anti-racist caucus groups aimed at ridding the mental health and social services field of embedded biases. Throughout his career, Alan has proclaimed his vision and values not only from the podium but he has also labored to infuse them in his own agency and throughout the community. This is Alan at his creative, visionary best.

### **A MENTOR, A TEACHER, AND A FRIEND**

Under Alan's direction, JBFCS nurtured and advanced the careers of countless professionals through the development of the Martha K. Selig Educational Institute. This premier training institute offers courses for new and seasoned professionals in the field, including those who work with clients young and old, as well as staff who work with adults with mental illness and victims of domestic violence. It partners with the Columbia University School of Social Work and the Mount Sinai School of Medicine and has supported important research, providing training and resources for the community. Alan's commitment to the value of training is steadfast. When budget constraints suggested that he reduce staff training, he refused to compromise, recognizing how critical it is for staff to remain on the cutting edge of the field.

Alan is a phenomenal mentor. Many in the field of Jewish communal service and in the social services see Alan as a steadfast source of support. They call on him for advice on matters personal and professional, but also when they need guidance on how to deal with a troubled teenager or the loss of a loved one. And Alan always makes himself available, time and again.

Those in this field understand how hard it is to make changes and adapt. Alan has always involved his staff in the change process and has fostered serious discussions of difficult professional and organizational is-

sues. He has been a change agent through his support of women as professionals, promoting women to senior positions in the organization and supporting policies to make JBFCS a more family-friendly place with flexible schedules. He has similarly affected generations of immigrants, establishing professional training, skills enhancement, and career opportunities for the growing numbers of Russian-speaking Jewish professionals.

Where some executives are content with a complacent board of directors, Alan recognized that a dynamic lay-professional partnership is one of the hallmarks and strengths of Jewish communal agencies. With his customary light touch, Alan engaged his board, inviting them to become intimately involved in policy, programs, and governance. Alan will leave knowing that his agency will be led by superbly trained professionals and an involved and informed board.

Each of Alan's accomplishments is a story in itself. Each program, each new ini-

tiative, and each life he touched, directly or indirectly, serve as an inherent tribute to an extraordinary career.

A final note: Alan did not know that this issue of the *Journal* was being prepared in his honor. Had he known, his modesty might not have allowed it. But for once, Alan would have gotten it wrong. For every family he has helped heal, for every life that he has touched with his gentle compassion, and for always teaching as he leads, he deserves every word found between these pages and far more.

JBFCS, the New York Jewish community, and the entire field of human services—within the Jewish community, throughout the city of New York, and far beyond—have been stronger for having had Alan Siskind as a senior colleague. These pages seek to convey the depth of regard and respect for Alan as a leader and a mentor. We honor the enduring legacy that he leaves as he begins the next chapter in his remarkable professional journey.