

## Reaching Out by Angela Krieger

Reflecting on my early years as a convert, I struggled to understand how my family and I gained acceptance in the Jewish community without the benefit of a formal Outreach Program.

I recall attending *Oneg Shabbats* not knowing anyone when all around us seemed to know everyone, of having to continually introduce myself, each time assessing whether to offer the fact of my recent conversion or whether the brief conversation had so abruptly ended because it had already been concluded I was a convert.

Then, unexpectedly, an invitation from an older couple, long-time Temple members, to come to dinner. Then, they to our house. Then, Uncle David fondly entertaining our toddlers while his Rachel served her “golden hand” cookies.

David and Rachel’s friendship had a powerful ripple effect, leading to acceptance and friendships with others. I also was changed, gaining confidence to reach out and enter fully into Temple life.

As comfortable as I had become as a Jew-by-Choice, I welcomed the arrival of the Outreach Program. There were conversations with parents and extended family that were overdue or in stasis. Difficult topics involving competing theologies, traditions, and family allegiances could now be explored in a safe place, surrounded by others facing the same discomfort in their families.

Formal Outreach programming also invited the wider community to listen in, to enrich the discussion, to learn the names and concerns of the strangers in their midst.

My journey from convert, to Jew-by-Choice, to a fully-integrated member of my Jewish community has clearly been facilitated by two forms of outreach – friendships nurtured over time and formal programming.

I am convinced that lower-case outreach needs its upper-case counterpart and vice versa. As a community, we must resist delegating to our Outreach committee total responsibility to mentor the Jew-by-Choice or to welcome the interfaith couple.

Simple gestures of friendship, an outreached hand, an introduction, a greeting of Shalom, an unexpected invitation to dinner, are powerful tools in building bridges between people and accelerating genuine integration into the community. Shabbat Shalom!