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JFS of Passaic-Clifton's New Executive Director Ozer Herzog Looks to 2022 and Beyond

By Leah Gottheim

Alexander "Ozer" Herzog is keeping his finger on the pulse of the Passaic-Clifton community as he grows into his new role as executive director of Jewish Family Services. JFS hired Herzog on March 1, 2021, after the previous director, Esther East, retired.

So now that Herzog has had some time to settle in, how does he feel about his new role?

"Little did I know that I would be working harder now than I had ever worked before," Herzog said. "There are a lot of demands, but I consider it a pleasure and a privilege. Esther built the clinic from a handful of employees to over 50. I feel that she ran with the baton and got it this far, and my job is to take the baton and go that next distance.

"For me the challenge is being able to acknowledge, appreciate and build upon all the amazing things that the agency does, as well as asking where it can grow in the future and what are the needs of the community that we need to address. The needs of the community change and evolve. There's of course an adjustment period to doing things in Ozer's style and not Esther's."

Before joining JFS, Herzog was the chief of social work service for the Veterans Administration Health Care System in New Jersey, and although federal work is very different from a private sector nonprofit, he feels his background has been helpful in his new role.

"I think borrowing from my federal experience is creating systems and infrastructure that can support the growth that is possible and needed. It's about creating an internal organization that would lend itself to expansion."

Herzog was extremely pleased to find that the clinical caliber of all the staff is excellent. He feels that one of JFS' biggest strengths is that "the agen-

cy does a phenomenal job of training people and giving staff experience." However, the downside is that "they come out so strong that they tend to get poached by other agencies or go to private practice. One of the things I'm working on is increasing retention of our talented staff."

So what's happened at the agency since he arrived? Herzog has already made some specific changes to JFS programming.



Ozer Herzog

"We have Club Sequoia, our senior socialization program. It's a co-ed program, but we added some single-gender programming in response to a number of women who wanted that kind of programming."

Another thing he's done is that through a grant, he has hired a new director of psychology services, Rachel Dale, PsyD. "We're trying to diversify our clinical staff in different disciplines," Herzog said. "Especially in the area of mental health, it's important to have that.

"We're developing an exciting new program to provide affordable children's psychology testing, to help children access services," he continued. "It's helpful for parents to understand what is going on with their children. It's also expensive and in high demand, so offering it through JFS can be a huge benefit for the community."

Another big goal is to ensure the financial well-being of the agency. "We're aggressively pursuing grants that will help fund a lot of programming as well. We're also trying to maximize insurance reimbursement revenue.

"The board has been very supportive of me and is quite involved in a very positive way, trying to be as helpful as possible," Herzog said appreciatively. "Being able to leverage the unique skills and talents of each board member for the agency and community has been a real pleasure.

"I can't speak highly enough about the staff, who have embraced the new things we've implemented, supporting our big objectives and providing the highest quality services to the community. The therapists are extraordinarily dedicated and passionate about doing good therapy."

One of the other new things he instituted is creating teams that are focused on various populations—seniors, children and adults. "The benefit of this is to tap into the strengths and passions of our clinicians," Herzog explained. "If the therapist is passionate about the population they're working with, that affects outcomes. Not that they're being pigeonholed, but we're trying to build on their strengths and their interests, honing in on training and experience in that specialization.

"We're really trying to be available to the rabbonim, the leaders of the schools, and regularly interfacing with leadership to discuss what issues they're seeing and, in situations when there is a release signed, to discuss specific cases when needed."

JFS has recently given a number of seminars to offer parents tools to address relevant and sensitive issues. How does JFS decide whether to address particular community issues or events in the news, such as the Walder case?

"I'm in regular contact with the rabbonim on the board, to be mind-

ful of the sensitivities of some of these topics," Herzog said.

Herzog noted that the JFS Annual Breakfast is coming up. "It's a very special event that really brings the entire community together, even more than shul and school events since it's inclusive of everyone across all spectrum of the community. Whether people benefit directly from our services or not, we try to provide useful things for everyone, including articles and information about parenting that we try to share. We're here for the entire community."

What has stood out the most in the new job?

"What's been really amazing has been to see from the inside all of the miracles and chesed that people do, that nobody knows about—whether because of humility or confidentiality," Herzog said. "I see people going above and beyond to help others way beyond their hours of the week. Nobody would see that in the community, but from my vantage point, I see the insider's front-seat view into the mesiras nefesh of the case managers and volunteers. There's so much that these dedicated people do that most people are not aware of. That's the way it's meant to be. It's been really inspirational for me.

"When I was president of Tiferet Israel, I saw something similar on a smaller scale—the people who contribute on so many levels to make the shul run successfully, who no one knows about."

What are Herzog's goals for the years to come?

"I want the agency to continue to grow to meet all the needs of the community in the future," he said. "I have a lot of ideas that I am excited to explore. I feel like I'm still new and there are still a lot of things I'm learning. I would say that there are a lot of things I'm looking into, and you're going to see a lot of exciting new programming and services coming from us in the future."