



Clockwise from the upper left: Judy, Judy, Judy, Judy, whoops, Judy, whoops, Judy, Judy, Judy, Judy. And (missing from Elijah's chair because she's photographing her homonyms): Judy.

JEWISH JUDYS & JUDITHS

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

by Judy Brodkey

I recently discovered a new approach to organizing Jewish women.

Last September my friend Judith Wild and I began planning a Jewish Judys & Judiths party for early November. The idea started out as a joke, but I decided we should make it happen. I tend to take life pretty seriously (I organize on issues of injustice—racism, sexism, anti-Semitism—in both my professional and avocational lives). I thought this party would lighten me up. I was also deliberately looking for ways to break through my isolation—I had lived in Portland, Oregon for two years, but it still felt like a very new city to me.

One of the biggest challenges of planning the party was to track down Jewish women named Judy & Judith in Portland. We sent invitations to all the synagogues and Jewish women's organizations in the area. We also posted notices in high visibility spots like the Jewish Community Center. Mostly we relied on word of mouth to identify our constituency.

I loved telling people about the party. Whenever I mentioned it, people invariably got excited. Sometimes non-Judys were distressed that they weren't invited ("Can't I come too?"), or they reprimanded me ("Why are you doing something exclusive?").

A fun dividend of organizing the party was spending

several hours in the library researching the names "Judy" & "Judith." Growing up (in Sioux City, Iowa), I had never felt very proud of my name, so it was a big contradiction to find symphonies, poems, sculptures, a radio show, a television show, a movie, and more than 60 books by or about women with my name. Judith Wild and I also identified almost 25 famous Judys & Judiths (Judy Woodruff, Judith Jamison, Judy Carne, Judy Holliday, Judy Blume, etc.), some of them even Jewish!

After two months of concentrated organizing, the day of the party finally arrived. To create ambiance, I put out Judy paraphernalia: books, postcards, even a sign advertising a performance of the rock band "Judybats." I also put out our fledgling Judy music collection: albums by Judy Collins and Judy Garland; the Judith Triumphant symphony by Vivaldi, and sheet music for some obscure Judy songs such as "Judy Drowned," a West Indies folk tale.

Sixteen Jewish Judys & Judiths showed up for the party. We've since identified a total of 30 women! From the time the women came through the front door, it was obvious they were very pleased to be coming together. They were talking a lot—laughing and chattering—even before we started the organized portion of our party.

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"CAN'T WE
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We had a whole agenda of "Judy games" planned, but we only got through the first two. For introductions, we asked the women to share something about themselves which made them unique among Jewish Judys & Judiths. Perhaps not unexpectedly, our guests did not stick to answering the question. Instead, many digressed in various directions, including talking about how they felt about their names, what it was like to grow up with the name "Judy" or "Judith," who they were named for, and mini-versions of life histories.

Despite moments of chaos, the group gave each woman good attention, and there was a lot of animated exchange, laughter, maybe even a few tears. The Judys & Judiths in the room felt safe—and consequently shared some important and undisguised things about themselves. The introductions seemed to take forever, but it was neat to begin to get to know one another.

Our second activity was a mixer, "Find a Judy Who. . . ." Each woman was given a paper with the words "Find a Judy Who. . ." at the top, and then a long list. Find a Judy who is left-handed, has been to Israel more than five times, has eaten ham, had a bat mitzvah, has lived on a farm, knows a Jewish baseball player, is a parent, etc.

The women at the party had about 15 minutes to mill around and find others who fit each category. Then we got the group back together and went through each item, asking the women to raise their hands if an item pertained to them.

I had thought this part would be over in five minutes, but instead just about every item generated further discussion and sometimes further questions. The group wanted to know who had been raised working-class, who had been raised in the South, and so on. The women were very curious about each other. I don't think we've had many opportunities to come together as Jewish women and find out about each other's lives.

Before we knew it, two hours had passed and we were rapidly approaching the end of our party. As I started to suggest that we go into the other room for refreshments, there was a flurry of side discussion. Suddenly

three women volunteered to plan another Jewish Judys & Judiths party in February. There was even talk of a logo and a JJ&J trip to Israel! Judith Wild and I were stunned. Going into this we thought perhaps the women would want us to plan another get-together in a year or two. We were not prepared for the level of enthusiasm.

We went into the dining room for the last few minutes of the party. We had made a cake which read, "Judy & Judith, You're Terrific!" We lit one candle for each woman present, and sang "Happy Birthday" to ourselves. Total silliness, but everyone seemed to be having a good time anyway!

After the party was over and some of us were cleaning up, one woman said she thought our guests had gone away feeling very good and empowered. Her words took me by surprise. Empowered? By a party? On further reflection, and after hearing post-party comments from others, I think she was right.

The success of the party remains a delightful mystery to me. Maybe it is an indication of Jewish women's longing for each other. Or perhaps it's important for us to take pride

in something as simple as our names.

In many ways, this party was my most successful organizing effort of the last several years. Organizing with lightness and playfulness certainly seems to have some advantages over head-on organizing around distress and oppression. Maybe the fast-track to global well-being is, after all, simply to organize the whole world according to first names! The goal of community building is to feel connected, not separate—how nice it was (for a change) to create a community for ourselves based on joy, and not on neediness and plummeting hopes.

Meanwhile, the Jewish Judys & Judiths of Portland are moving forward! We'll let you know what happens next. □

FIND A JUDY WHO is Coordinator of the Oregon Breast and Cervical Cancer Coalition, and is an organizational development consultant; who teaches people how to organize on issues of racism, sexism and anti-Semitism; and who, in her spare time, is learning the trapeze and unicycle (and also loves chocolate and baseball.)

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