

Hoffmann Finishes Term as National NCJW President

By June Scharf

Debbie Hoffmann, outgoing national president of the National Council of Jewish Women, never would have believed you if you'd told her that someday she'd be seated across a table from President Barack Obama at the White House, discussing the U.S.-Israel relationship. He shook her hand, then promptly introduced her to the guest of honor that day, former Israeli President and Prime Minister Shimon Peres, who was receiving a Congressional Gold Medal in 2014. She was one of 13 leaders of Jewish organizations present in the Oval Office.

The Obama connection was also manifest with invitations to the former administration's annual Hanukkah parties during her three years of service. Not bad for the BHS Class of 1972 member who first became a volunteer for the Cleveland section of NCJW in the late 1980s, and later served as a vice president, then president.

As long as a trail of names is being dropped here, it would be remiss to exclude Oprah Winfrey. Hoffmann was invited to a screening of a documentary series called *Belief*, produced by Oprah's OWN TV network, exploring different religious and spiritual practices across the globe. As the national president of NCJW, Hoffmann was included with other leaders of faith-based organizations to have dinner under a large tent at Oprah's estate in Montecito, California to discuss better understanding among different religions and cultures.

The glamour here belies the many hours of hard work Hoffmann dedicated to NCJW over her tenure as president. Last month, the Beachwood resident had the opportunity to reflect on her service at the NCJW national convention in Atlanta where the new president was installed. Before Hoffmann took the stage,

her daughter, Carly Hoffmann, 28, provided an introduction. In those remarks, Carly noted some of the qualities her mother brought to her work.

"My mom is not shy – she doesn't back down from a fight, and she's not easily intimidated. Over the past three years, I've seen countless examples of her strength and tenacity," Carly stated. She also recalled taking a few lessons while overhearing some of her mom's conference calls. "I learned so much about the importance of being critical but open-minded, and of constantly being curious."

The last time a member of the Cleveland section served as national president of the 125-year-old organization was in the 1960s, when Barbara Mandel, wife of Mort Mandel, held the position. At the national level, NCJW's thrust often relates to lobbying Congressional members in Washington, D.C. about a range of policy issues. Some of them include reproductive justice and expanding access to contraception, women's health, eliminating trafficking of women and girls, and providing safe havens for those who are able to escape.

"Through our sections across the country, we are advocating at the state level to develop legislation

that advances our social justice issues," Hoffmann explains.

NCJW takes an additional interest in issues facing Israeli women, such as the matter of marriage and the inability to have a civil ceremony. "Only rabbis perform the ritual. As a result, some people go to Cyprus as an alternative," she notes. The organization also funds small non-profits in Israel that help teach trafficked women a trade so they are more employable.

One focus for Hoffmann was creating a strategic plan to bolster grassroots involvement nationwide. "Our traditional strategies needed to be updated," she says. To women in their 20s and 30s who ask, "What can I do and how can I make a difference?" Hoffmann says this is a watershed moment in time.

"We need to work to stop policy-making that's against women, the poor and the immigrant population. At NCJW, we pursue justice and we give back." The organization approaches issues "using a Jewish lens and Jewish values," she adds.

"We need people to say what they think, and to get out there and not be afraid. Don't wait for another day!" Running for office is another route to involvement. Just to reinforce the possibilities, Hoff-

mann mentions, "I never thought I'd be the national president."

And she never anticipated being mentioned by name in recorded remarks by Hillary Clinton, aired at the convention on the occasion of Clinton receiving an award.

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~ Debbie Hoffmann, outgoing national president of the National Council of Jewish Women

At the ceremony, during Hoffmann's own remarks, she stated, "Wherever I have travelled, I have heard the same thing: the women of NCJW know how to get work done and can be depended on to do it. We have the power, knowledge and grassroots network to make a difference and to advance social change."

In a sentiment expressed by Clinton in her recorded segment that profoundly struck Hoffmann, Clinton declared: "I know you're just getting started." Hoffmann echoes that thought.



Debbie Hoffmann seated across a table from President Barack Obama at the White House, discussing the U.S.-Israel relationship. Pictured Right: Hoffmann at a screening of the documentary *Belief* with Oprah Winfrey.

