

Hillel's Sheila Katz: Inspiring Others to Make An Impact

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Sheila helping to build a community center during a Hillel-AJWS alternative spring break trip

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Sheila Katz

By Abigail Pickus

When Sheila Katz started working for Hillel in 2007, she looked around at the leadership and saw a whole lot of men.

“I was so excited thinking maybe this would be my career, but when I looked around the landscape of who was running Hillel, I certainly didn’t see anyone who looked like me. It was mostly male executive directors and a lot of male rabbis,” said Katz.

But as Hillel International's first Vice President for Social Entrepreneurship and the youngest vice president in the history of the organization, the 31-year-old Katz is climbing the ladder of success – while paving the way for a more diverse and inclusive Jewish world.

Growing up in Rockland County, Katz was very active in the Reform movement. “Being Jewish was definitely a part of my experience growing up: Hebrew school, *bat mitzvah*, and my family was geared toward social justice. That connection between justice and being Jewish was shown to me at an early age,” she said.

But in her youth when her mother's multiple sclerosis came out of remission, confining her to a wheelchair, Katz found herself noticing the contrasting ways in which the Jewish community responded to her family's needs.

On the one hand, her mom's friends rallied and helped with everything from bringing over meals to carpooling the Katz's three daughters (Katz has a twin sister and a younger sister). On the other hand, their synagogue, which was in a converted old house, was not as handicap accessible as it could have been.

“I saw two ways the Jewish community could act: one inspired by our values and one more modeled after business practices,” recalled Katz. “Since then my role in the Jewish community has been a bridge between those things. One of the main reasons why I have worked to help Jewish organizations be more inclusive is so that no one has to experience that moment my mother did where she felt unwelcome.”

After graduating from Ithaca College, Katz worked as a Teach for America Corps Member for two years in New York. Facing a school that was about to be shut down, she called up her former Hillel director at Ithaca for guidance.

“It wasn't my intention to work for Hillel, but when I spoke to Michael Faber he said, ‘Sheila if you are applying for things in higher education, you might want to also apply for something at Hillel. I think you will like it,’” she said.

That was the beginning of a now eight-year tenure at Hillel.

“I completely bought into the mission of Hillel,” said Katz. “It was then that I understood with much more depth that I wanted to continue my own Jewish journey.”

She began as a program director and later assistant director at the University of North Carolina Hillel. There she focused on service learning.

“I had the best job. I took students around the world to do service work and connect them to Jewish values,” she said. Their work included interfaith dialogue, such as bringing Jewish and Muslim women together on campus.

Later she was promoted to be the Associate Director of Ask Big Questions, a position that took her to Washington, DC, where Hillel International is headquartered.

In this role, she took a local program and expanded its scope to impact all college students (not only the Jewish ones), to bring diverse people together for thoughtful and respectful dialogue.

Soon after that, Katz was recruited by Hillel's President Eric Fingerhut to become Vice President for Social Entrepreneurship, a position she's held for under a year.

"My whole portfolio revolves around doing things from the ground up," she said. "My job is to listen to students and help them actualize their ideas to change the world."

So far, she has launched a new fellowship with Presentense that gives students the opportunity to "transform their community."

"Students present their idea and we give them the mentors and the tools to make it happen in any area that they want to make an impact," she said.

Another project she has launched is a partnership with the White House to combat the rape culture on campus.

Katz is also a Wexner Field Fellow through the Wexner Foundation, a prestigious fellowship offering professional development for Jewish communal professionals.

But if Katz is now seated at the big table with the big players, the credit goes not to luck but to her unique combination of hard work, perseverance and a lot of ingenuity.

One example is the mentorship program she created with Tilly Shames, now the Executive Director of University of Michigan's Hillel. "When I got to Hillel I saw that there was a lot of professional opportunities for executive directors but not much else," said Katz. By pairing more senior program professionals with those just starting out, she reasoned, not only would it be possible to grow individually but it would also give newer staffers a role model for bigger opportunities.

Over five years later the mentorship program now includes a professional coaching system that enables mentors to support their mentees, as well as ongoing learning for all participants.

Finding her own role model was something of a challenge for Katz early in her career.

"When I was starting out I didn't understand what I could be. I never had a model to look at to know what was possible," she said.

At the same time, she wasn't looked at as a leader herself.

"When I was in my 20s, people took one look at me and dismissed me. I didn't look like what a leader was supposed to be," she said.

That all changed when she had lunch with Kathy Manning, the former Chair of the Board of Trustees for the Jewish Federations of North America. “For the first moment I could picture myself running a Jewish organization in an inclusive way” said Katz.

In contemplating a changing, more inclusive landscape in the workplace, particularly for gender equality, Katz credits leaders like Sheryl Sandberg for encouraging women to “lean into their experiences and to step up and be seen as credible and take advantages of opportunities.” At the same time, she feels that too many barriers are built into the system preventing women from stepping up.

“If men and women start out equally in the workplace,” she continued, “and we continue to only see men grow in the organizations, then we are doing something wrong. We don’t have policies that are as inclusive or supportive around having children as we need. I have benefited in our workforce by not having kids and I’d like to see my friends who are equally as capable as me, who have chosen to have children, be able to thrive in our organizations. The way it is now in many Jewish organizations is once a woman has a child, she needs to take all her sick days [because maternity leave is so brief] and then when she gets sick, she has to take unpaid leave. I’ve seen this happen time and time again. You get to the point where it doesn’t make financial sense for that person to remain in the workplace. We are losing top talent and we could do better.”

But that doesn’t mean that things have to continue this way.

“I am interested in using the position I am in to advocate for women. I would like to see us value inclusive leadership styles. I would like to see Jewish organizations specifically model what it looks like to be inclusive for the diverse needs of our employees and constituents. Clearly there is a lot more to be done in this area,” she said.

Katz learned the hard way how to be a strong advocate for herself.

While still at the University of North Carolina Hillel she won the International Richard M. Joel Exemplar of Excellence Award, an honor usually bestowed on more senior staff.

When she returned to work it dawned on her that since she had just gotten an international honor, she was going to ask for a raise.

“I started doing research about how much people were making and I suddenly realized that I was grossly underpaid.”

Yet despite what can only be described as a lack of support for her newfound sense of self-worth in the workplace – including one woman who told her to just find a husband instead – Katz merely dug in her heels deeper.

“This opened my eyes to all of the built-in assumptions about what women and men ought to be doing and it made me a better advocate for myself,” she said. “When I first came into the system, I didn’t negotiate for my first job, which meant I just got percentage increases, but when I look at someone who negotiated when they started out, their increase was drastically different. I mentor people that it is

important to negotiate, to do everything to set yourself up for financial success. So I used an experience that was less than positive for me to help other women learn the importance of negotiating.”

She is also quick to point out her gratitude for the many mentors she now has, including two with whom she is in regular contact: Shifra Bronznick, Founding Director of Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community and Marci Koblenz, CEO of Companies that Care.

And while Katz is now paid equally, she recognizes that this is not the case for everyone in the Jewish communal world.

“Today this is the greatest challenge and the biggest opportunity,” she said. “We say we care about [our employees] yet we don’t always take care of them. What message does it send if you are a full-time Jewish professional and you can’t afford to send your kid to Jewish day school?”

The same goes for inclusiveness.

“There is so much more we can be doing structurally to make sure our workplace is good for women, LGBTQ individuals, and people with disabilities. If we are going to operate based on our Jewish values then our workplaces will work a lot differently,” she said.

While today there are more female heads of Federations and Hillels than ever before, Katz believes there is still much more work to be done.

“If we look around at the makeup of the people we want to inspire we have to ask ourselves how do we have them represented in the organization?” she said.

As for the future, Katz is not shy about her ambitions.

“I talk openly about my desire to run a major Jewish organization,” she said.

“My goal is really not only becoming a CEO, but being someone who can say that out loud as a way to inspire other young women who want to make an impact. I would like to see this next generation of young women being my boss at some point in time.”

*“Hillel’s Sheila Katz: Inspiring Others to Make An Impact” is part of an on-going series on young Jewish adults – both entrepreneurs and communal professionals – **making a difference in their world, and ours.***