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## Preface

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# Preface

*Jenna Toplin*

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**W**e are undeniably living in a time when economies and societies as we know them are shifting and rapidly changing the roles of organizations and community leaders. In the democratic societies of Boston and Haifa, tensions across economics, race, identity, and security are high. This journal captures the impact of a project, a learning exchange, between nonprofit leaders that crossed these tensions and brought people together who otherwise may not have had nor sought out the opportunity to learn and reflect together. The implications of the changes happening around us surfaced organically through this exchange as questions were asked, missions were challenged, and inspiring stories of change and perseverance were shared. The essays in this journal, written by participants of the Boston–Haifa Learning Exchange Network (LEN), look through six lenses to reflect upon the impact of societal changes on their work and their communities: Challenges for the Nonprofit Sector; Transnational Learning Networks; Nonprofits and Social Change; Collaborations, Partnerships, Networks; Adaptive Capacity and Social Change; Nonprofit Leadership.

In the opening chapter of *Blessed Unrest*, Paul Hawken speaks of a global movement of individuals who are confronting despair to bring justice to the world. He says, “Inspiration is not garnered from the recitation of what is flawed; it resides, rather, in humanity’s willingness to restore, redress, reform, rebuild, recover, reimagine, and reconsider.” The individual and collective strengths and successes — even in the face of dire challenges — are shared in this journal as the writers reflect upon their energy and hope as they reconsider the reality and reimagine our world.

*Jenna Toplin is an M.B.A. candidate at Simmons College School of Management in Boston. After graduating from Boston University in 2005, Jenna joined the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston. As the International Partnerships program coordinator, she developed and organized numerous programs and initiatives in Haifa and Dnepropetrovsk, Boston’s sister cities in Israel and Ukraine respectively, including the Boston–Haifa Learning Exchange Network. She is looking forward to working with organizations to develop their capacity in order to effectively execute their strategy.*

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## **History of the Boston–Haifa Learning Exchange Network**

Between 2005 and 2009, social change leaders from Boston, Massachusetts, and Haifa, Israel, traveled on a learning journey together as members of the Boston–Haifa LEN, an adventure that would prove to be enriching and inspiring for all involved. The common vision of stronger communities and societies where differences might be celebrated and equal access to opportunities could exist resonated deeply with all participating organizations and leaders. Leaders embraced the opportunity to walk out of their organizations and beyond their immediate environments to learn with other community leaders and to place their day-to-day work in a global context. Bostonians and Haifaim met peers in their own cities who had successes to celebrate and challenges to tackle — some of whom worked across town but whose paths had not crossed.

While cultural differences permeated the Network, cross-cultural and transnational barriers lowered as they recognized and celebrated the similarities in work, purpose, and challenges they all experienced. Despite the differing everyday contexts — government, society, perceived and actual role of the third sector, and community politics — the desire to lead effectively to create change in local communities drew everyone together to a common ground.

In 2004, the Boston–Haifa Social Justice & Civil Society (SJCS) Committee of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston (JCRC) (part of the Haifa–Boston connection of Combined Jewish Philanthropies), implemented a multiyear initiative to improve civil society in Haifa through the strengthening of NGOs (nongovernmental organizations). Initially, this project focused on consulting activities to aid the organizational development of NGOs in Haifa through the Council of Volunteer Organizations (CVO), which envisioned itself as a hub where NGOs in Haifa could develop skills and connect to one another.

In the winter of 2005, eleven NGO leaders from Boston traveled to Israel with the JCRC as part of this initiative. This trip included a two-day seminar in Haifa with Haifa social justice leaders. Participant Dr. Donna Haig Friedman, Director of the McCormack Graduate School’s Center for Social Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston, craved a deeper understanding of the country’s emerging antipoverty policies and a stronger connection to the NGO leaders whose commitment and work had inspired her during her brief Haifa experience. In less than a year, Donna joined the SJCS Committee and received a Fulbright Teaching/Research Fellowship in Haifa for the spring of 2007.

In partnership with the JCRC’s SJCS committee, the research project quickly developed into a true exchange among leaders and organizations from Boston and Haifa. The seeds of the Learning Exchange Network had been planted in 2005 and quickly began to take root with the guidance of Donna and an active subcommittee

of the SJSC Committee, including volunteers and professionals from both cities and organized by the CVO and JCRC. A systematic recruitment process led to the selection of five service and advocacy NGOs in each city who became paired learning partners. Living in Haifa from February to May of 2007, Donna engaged in a participatory action research (PAR) project, building a connection between advocacy, social change, and scholarship through active engagement of the organizations. As Peter Park explains, PAR is a knowledge-producing endeavor that generates representational, relational and reflective knowledge by gathering and analyzing information, grounded in experience; strengthening community ties; and sharpening the ability to think and act critically.<sup>1</sup> With dialogue at the core of this process, the LEN created a space for sharing information and experience, creating common meanings and forging concerted action. The basic goals over the years were as follows:

- To strengthen the third sector through developing the knowledge and skills and empowering NGO leaders in Boston and in Haifa to continue to address the challenges and tackle the societal problems of their communities in every day circumstances and in extraordinary times of crisis;
- To build a platform for dialogue so that NGO leaders of Boston and Haifa might share best practices and develop skills to benefit each community;
- To develop the skills and abilities of these organizations and leaders to create fundamental change through experiential learning seminars;
- To further develop the relationships, partnerships, and collaboration among and between diverse community leaders in Boston and Haifa;
- To create products (tools, models) that would serve a wider range of NGOs working for social change in each city and together.

Thirty-four organizations have participated in this learning exchange, which has been documented between 2005 and 2009 as a way to build and preserve network knowledge. The first cohort incidentally included only women leaders, and the cohorts that followed engaged a diverse group of men and women leaders from the nonprofit and government sectors in both cities. Throughout the years of the exchange, recruited participants were known for their leadership and their organizations supported their involvement. While the commitment to a mutual learning exchange and engagement of a diverse group of social-change leaders remained consistent, this initiative's direction and content developed organically. The flexible structure allowed it to be a fully engaging experience that met the needs and wants of participants at different times. Network members provided feedback and input regarding the direction of the exchange, because it was important that the learning be relevant to them, their staffs, boards, and volunteers.

Organizational leaders with visions of their community and of the world stepped beyond their agency's walls to reflect, to learn, and to teach. At different times and

for different participants, the experience was one in which professional development and personal transformation emerged as a shared vision. During walks through city neighborhoods, video conferences, and jointly led seminar sessions, members of the LEN discussed relevant issues of leadership, social change, community engagement, and cross-sector collaboration. Through this experience, as well as in their everyday work and personal lives, members of the LEN empowered and inspired others as leaders and as global citizens. It was a safe space to disagree, to challenge, and to process. Personal connections developed and organizational collaboration has resulted within and across cities. As one leader reflected, “The differences lie in culture, language, and so forth, and the similarities are that we are engaged in breaking through barriers that extenuate differences. We are connecting with humanity and celebrating differences. We have and need to continue to create safe spaces where we are free to be ourselves at the heart level and in creating relationships.”

In *Blessed Unrest*, Peter Hawken compares this global, grassroots movement with the human body’s immune system — it is diverse and it is everywhere. At the core of immunity, Hawken says, “is a miracle of recovery and restoration . . . some would say it is a mystery.” It uses internal and external “connective networks” of different sizes and strengths and is somewhat chaotic while appearing orderly. This network of leaders has experienced internal and external processes of change — across oceans and organizations and within themselves and their organizations. The LEN has established relationships, engaged in dialogue, and embraced diversity, joining tens of millions of people worldwide to work toward “restoration and social justice.” As teachers and learners, LEN members continue their learning and reflection in these pages. Their stories bring a diverse collection of voices, experiences, and perspectives and capture a shared vision of creating lasting, systemic change and bettering the communities in which we live.



## Notes

1. Peter Park, “Knowledge and Participatory Research” in *Handbook of Action Research*, ed. Reason and Bradbury, 83-90 (Newbury, CA: Sage Publications).



