



# Case Study: The Mothers Circle Portland, Oregon



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Mothers Circle program was created to provide Jewish parenting skills and knowledge to women of other religious backgrounds who have committed to raising Jewish children. The Jewish Outreach Institute (JOI) offers education, resources, and support to these dedicated women through local partnering organizations and facilitators that implement The Mothers Circle curriculum.

The Mothers Circle of Portland, Oregon attributes much of its success to the support of sponsors and community partnerships. Since 2008, the communal efforts of the program have led to one of the highest Mothers Circle enrollments of any North American community. Alumnae of The Portland Mothers Circle seek out increased involvement in Jewish communal life in a variety of ways, particularly within programs offered by partnering organizations. In turn, support from these partners allows for increased recruitment opportunities for the program, to create a virtuous cycle.

The Portland Mothers Circle has established a positive reputation, which it maintains through effective program implementation, continued partnerships, and community buy-in. Portland serves as a model for other communities by demonstrating the impact of The Mothers Circle program through the increased Jewish engagement of participants and the enrollment of their children in Jewish education, as well as through the community's high level of collaboration and commitment.

## INTRODUCTION

What if you have decided to raise children in a faith other than your own? Where would you turn for guidance? To whom would you look for answers? The Mothers Circle, a program of the Jewish Outreach Institute (JOI), serves this purpose for women of other religious backgrounds raising Jewish children across North America, providing the tools necessary to create a Jewish home, and the venue to ask questions of women just like them. For many interfaith families, The Mothers Circle serves as the catalyst for a richer, more engaged relationship with Judaism and the Jewish community. Because of the transformative power of this class, the more women whose lives JOI can touch through The Mothers Circle, the more interfaith families we can help to have richer and more meaningful Jewish experiences for themselves and their children.

A successful Mothers Circle program not only enriches the participants' lives during the course, but also long after, through the knowledge gained in the course and also through a vibrant network of mothers who have participated in the program and have faced the same challenges. One example of a successful Mothers Circle program takes place in Portland, Oregon.

A coalition of Jewish organizations in Portland hosted the first Mothers Circle in the area in 2008. Since its inception, the community has hosted four Mothers Circles, which have served over 80 women who were not born Jewish. Upon completing The Mothers Circle program, many of these women go on to serve in leadership positions at Jewish communal organizations, send their children to local Jewish schools, and generally involve themselves deeply in the Portland Jewish community. While the affiliation rate among Portland Mothers Circle alumnae is slightly lower than the national average for the program (see below graphs), it is still much higher than the local Jewish population in general, and the percentage of participants who express interest in alumnae programming demonstrates the strong bond that forms over the course of the class.



The Portland Mothers Circle has one of the most consistently large class sizes among Mothers Circle communities in North America. This is important because a robust enrollment increases the network of mutual support established by The Mothers Circle course and listserve. We seek to serve as many such women as possible through The Mothers Circle. Thus, we hope to replicate our success in Portland in even more communities throughout North America, and thereby reach more women.

## PROGRAM STRUCTURE

There are two primary staff members who work together to implement The Mothers Circle in Portland. The program director of Congregation Neveh Shalom, formerly Caron Rothstein and now Jennifer Greenberg, serves as The Mothers Circle coordinator. The facilitator, Lois Shenker, is a seasoned educator, author, and life coach in the Portland area.

The Portland Mothers Circle has been a communal partnership since the community implemented its first Circle in 2008. The two main partners are Congregation Neveh Shalom, which provides the staff for the project, and the Mittleman Jewish Community Center (MJCC), which houses the Circles. While we usually recommend that organizations hold Mothers Circle programs in secular spaces (since doing so can lower the barrier for potential participants), using the MJCC helps to foster wider community support for the program. In addition, Jewish Community Centers may be perceived as lower barrier institutions than synagogues for women of other religious backgrounds. Other community partners include: the Oregon Board of Rabbis, B'nai B'rith Camp (the local Jewish summer camp), Beit Midrash Eitz Chaim, Congregations Beth Israel, Havurah Shalom, Kol Ami, Shaarie Torah, and Shir Tikvah. These partners help with recruitment for the program and give the program wider community visibility. The course is funded locally through a Community Impact Grant from the Jewish Federation of Greater Portland, The Oregon Jewish Community Foundation, the Oregon Jewish Community Youth Foundation, and the Holzman Foundation. In addition, each community partner is requested (though not required) to pay a \$180 sponsorship fee to help defray the cost of the program.

The Portland Mothers Circle benefits from a variety of support mechanisms offered by JOI, provided to all operators of The Mothers Circle program throughout North America, including: a fully-articulated 16-session curriculum with additional optional sessions on a variety of relevant topics; marketing materials and guidance; one-on-one consultations with a Mothers Circle National Coordinator and other staff versed in outreach best-practices; connection to a large and growing network of fellow Mothers Circle coordinators and facilitators through regular conference calls and an online listserve; online resources to offer to their participants such as the very lively Mothers Circle National Listserve; and much more, thanks to the generosity of JOI supporters, particularly lead Mothers Circle funder, the Marcus Foundation.

The Portland Mothers Circle maximizes its sponsorship by partner organizations in a number of ways. The last 20 minutes of each Mothers Circle session is led by a "guest speaker" from one of the partner organizations. These speakers include rabbis from local synagogues, the manager of the PJ Library in Portland, a representative of the JCC, and a representative of the local Jewish day school. This serves to familiarize women with the Jewish community, and to help them understand the role community plays in Jewish life. The course also includes, as its last session, a tour of important Jewish locations in Portland, including the community *mikveh*, the Holocaust memorial, synagogues, and the Jewish home for the aged. "Graduating" from The Mothers Circle with exposure to these resources helps to introduce participants to all of the options available to them from the Jewish community of Portland, making them more likely to utilize the resources as they continue their journey deeper into Jewish life with their families.

Another unique feature of The Portland Mothers Circle is the pre-program assessment. While all participants are given a pre-program (and post-program) questionnaire as part of the evaluation of the



program nationally, the coordinator of the Portland Mothers Circle also speaks to each prospective participant one-on-one, in order to learn more about why she is interested in participating in the class. In addition to an interview (usually by telephone), participants are required to participate in an informational session that allows them to meet the facilitator before the class, as well as give staff members an opportunity to learn more about participants before the class begins and to confirm that prospective participants will benefit from taking the course. If this is not the case, then recommendations are made for other programs.

## RECRUITMENT

One of the most important parts of building a robust Mothers Circle is the recruitment of potential participants. The Portland Mothers Circle uses a variety of recruitment techniques, including: advertisements in the local anglo-Jewish paper; articles in synagogue newsletters and blogs; posters in local businesses; word-of-mouth; encouraging the staff of local Jewish schools to share the information with enrolled families; advertising in "intro to Judaism" classes, and through the Oregon Board of Rabbis. Since no one technique is effective on its own, we encourage organizations to use a variety of approaches since implementing different recruitment techniques will help an organization or organizational cluster reach a wider range of potential participants. It is important to note that Portland's communal approach to partnership allows for recruitment, posters, emails, and other more traditional methods of recruitment to be spread out over a wider catchment area than in communities in which a synagogue, for example, is the only sponsoring organization.

Caron Rothstein, the original Mothers Circle coordinator in Portland, emphasizes the importance of placing "human interest stories" in the local press to assist recruiting for The Mothers Circle. The local Jewish newspaper frequently features stories about The Mothers Circle program, and many of the course's participants have enrolled as a result of reading about the program in local newspapers. During the second year of The Mothers Circle program in Portland, the course was featured in the *Oregonian*, a local secular paper. This newspaper boasts a daily readership of nearly 250,000; the article generated over 100 inquiries. Rothstein also reported that she follows up with women who inquired about the program, but for whatever reason do not enroll. By doing so, she makes sure that those interested are provided with a personal touch should they want to reconnect at a later date, or address barriers to their participation that might have caused them to hesitate.

Both Rothstein and Shenker (the current Mothers Circle facilitator) note that mothers-in-law of women of other backgrounds raising Jewish children have the potential to serve as recruiters for The Mothers Circle. Several course participants enrolled in the program after it was recommended to them by their mothers-in-law. As many of these mothers-in-law are involved in local Jewish institutions but their daughters-in-law are not involved, advertising through local Jewish institutions reaches beyond eligible women who are already members. It is important to reach out to synagogue members who are not eligible for the program themselves as a source of recruitment. While many Mothers Circle participants do not live in the same communities as their in-laws, actively reaching out and sharing information about The Mothers Circle with the entire Jewish community will make sure that the entire community is aware of the program.

In addition, since The Mothers Circle has over 80 alumnae, most of whom still live in the Portland area, these alumnae are enlisted to assist in recruiting new participants. In addition, each participant is invited to bring a friend along for the last session tour of Jewish sites, regardless of whether or not they are eligible for the program. This helps to build relationships between various members of the community, provide insight into the program for community "insiders," and expose the community to the benefits of the program and its participants. As a result, these "newcomers" to the program help recruit potential participants.



## THE MOTHERS CIRCLE & THE PORTLAND JEWISH COMMUNITY

Much of why The Mothers Circle seems to work so well in Portland is due to the collaboration and support from many organizations in the community, which, in turn, leads to its demonstrated success. The program is financially supported in part by the local Jewish Federation, which allows for the expansion of the basic program to include cooking demonstrations and a bus tour at the conclusion of the program. In addition, local partner organizations provide support as well. For example, during the first session, all participants sign their children up for the local chapter of PJ Library. Rothstein explained that The Mothers Circle program is “the darling of the community,” which suggests that a broad awareness and positive reputation throughout Portland is helpful to the program's success.

It is also important to note that staff members involved with the Portland Mothers Circle are well known in the Portland Jewish community. Lois Shenker is a published author and educator who has worked in the Portland Jewish community for decades. This may help participants to feel more comfortable about joining the program. Lois also feels that she can empathize with participants as a mother who has intermarried adult children. This provides her with credibility.

## CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Outreach to The Mothers Circle target population can be a challenge, especially because potential participants are usually unaffiliated with institutions in the Jewish community. But the Jewish community in Portland demonstrates that it is key to community sustenance and future growth to reach these women and provide them with the tools necessary to raise Jewish children in the context of an intermarriage.

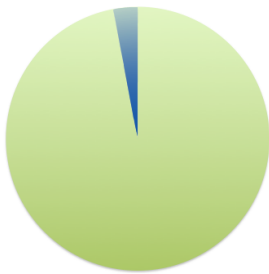
As noted, the Portland Mothers Circle makes intensive recruitment a priority. Since The Mothers Circle is one of the community's top priorities, this intensive level of program management and recruitment is successful in a way that may be more challenging for an organization with fewer staff or fiscal resources. The more resources that any organization or group of organizations has to devote to the recruitment of participants before the class, as well as the ability to nurture alumnae after the class, the more likely the program is to become a community-wide endeavor, and thereby benefit the entire community.

Because of its demonstrated success, The Mothers Circle enjoys a positive reputation among the member institutions in the Portland Jewish community. While achieving this broader community awareness can be helped through exposure in the community press and the like, multiple program partners, and encouraging alumnae to speak about the program to their social circles, indispensable to the success of the program are the attitudes of communal professionals toward the program. If a community understands the benefit of The Mothers Circle to all communal institutions, staff members at various organizations are far more likely to make recruitment of participants a priority, as well as manifest an interest in taking part in JOI's variety of training methods to reach a broad range of unengaged populations in the community.

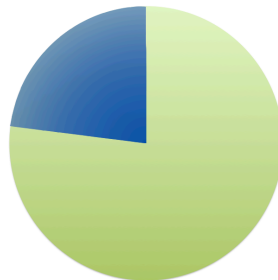
The success of The Mothers Circle in Portland can be duplicated in other communities. And as we are successful in those communities, as well, we will together be able to reach more interfaith families and bring them into the orbit of the North American Jewish community where we can welcome and serve them.



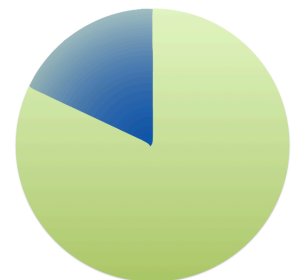
### The Mothers Circle Participant National Averages



97% plan to enroll their children in Jewish education



77% joined or plan to join Jewish organizations

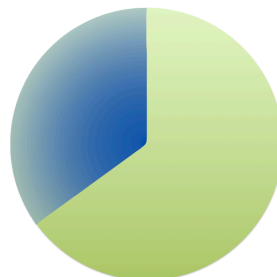


82% express a desire to stay involved with The Mothers Circle through alumnae groups

### The Mothers Circle Participant Portland, OR Averages



95% will choose or have chosen Jewish education for their children



65% have affiliated or plan to affiliate with a Jewish institution



93% report the desire to join Mothers Circle alumnae groups