

metro » on the cover

Love Livin' In The D

Dan, Alexander and
Rebecca Yowell live in
Brush Park.

Jewish families find city living satisfying.

Eli Natinsky | Special to the Jewish News



Rabbi Ariana Silverman, Rebecca and Justin Robert Long live in Woodbridge.

Will there be Jewish children growing up in the city of Detroit in the 21st century? That's the question Rabbi Ariana Silverman considers quite a bit.

Silverman, a Chicago native, lives in the Woodbridge neighborhood with her husband, Justin Robert Long, and their 18-month-old daughter, Rebecca. They are expecting their second child in July. Silverman is the rabbi at Temple Beth Israel in Jackson, and Long is an associate professor at Wayne State University's School of Law.

They moved from Manhattan in 2010. Silverman jokes that when they arrived, she and Long were "Jews two and three" in Woodbridge, across the Lodge Freeway from Wayne State. Now, 20 Jewish residents live there. Silverman said she loves living in the neighborhood.

"Many young Jews rave about living in Detroit and I would, too!" she said. "Our daughter is hugged by neighbors on our block whose race, religion, family structure, politics, socioeconomic status and/or sexual orientation are different from those of her parents. We have never had a problem with safety. And there was a welcome basket of Michigan foods from our neighbors when we moved in!"

Silverman estimates about 300 Jews live

in the city and, out of that number, there are "about 20" Jewish families. Her definition of a Jewish family is "at least one Jew living with children in Detroit."

Despite the sizable increase in the number of Jews living within the city limits over the last five years, it is still a small percentage of the total number of Jews living in Metro Detroit. A 2010 update to the Detroit Area Jewish Population Study of 2005 determined there were 66,500 Jews living in the region.

Vadim Avshalumov, program manager at the Downtown Detroit Partnership, said he knows of no data that confirms the number of Jews and Jewish families living within the city limits.

Avshalumov has a good understanding of the Jewish population trends in the city — he's an urban planner; he lives in Midtown and he is active in the Jewish community. Anecdotally, his impression is the number of post-college single professionals living in Detroit has significantly increased while the number of Jewish families has not increased at the same rate.

"I don't think the needle has moved on the number of Jewish families yet, to be honest," he said.

He does, however, see a lot of value in organizing a study to determine the num-

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ber of Jews and Jewish families in Detroit. His initial approach would be to talk to demographers or other professionals specializing in this type of work, determine how to best gather such data and then ask a local Jewish organization or foundation to fund the project.

JTOT DETROIT

In an effort to support Jewish families that have chosen to live in the city, Silverman started JTot Detroit with Kate Bush and Erin Einhorn, who also are Jewish parents in Detroit.

The group's Facebook page description: "JTot Detroit is a group of Jewish families raising Jewish kids in Detroit. We're looking for ways to create fun Jewish cultural activities, celebrate holidays and connect Jewishly in the city."

The group receives funding from the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit, and it has met three times — an organizational meeting in November, a Chanukah party in December and a Tu b'Shevat event in January. Members have indicated they would like to gather about once a month.

"The exciting thing about the November event was that people wanted to have more," Silverman said. "And we had a whole conversation about 'We're Jewish parents in Detroit and do we want to do anything together?' And the answer was 'Yes!'"

Seventeen families are on the contact list. Seven families came to the organizational meeting, and nine families came to the Chanukah event. The oldest child in the group is 7, but most of the kids are under age 4.

Silverman concedes there probably isn't going to be a "total explosion" of Jewish families living in the city. However, the JTot members could be the next generation of new Jewish families to live in the city, and this is cause for optimism.

"There have been scattered Jewish families here over the last 15 years, but the last five years have seen a baby boom. That is what is exciting to me — there are more and more Jewish kids who call Detroit home," she said. "This is a story that hasn't happened in a very long time."

JTot members live in neighborhoods including Midtown, Lafayette Park, Woodbridge, Palmer Woods and Downtown. Silverman estimates two-thirds are homeowners, and home ownership is an indicator of a community's longevity. If people are renting, it's easier to leave a neighborhood. However, if a family owns their dwelling, they have more at stake and are more likely to remain long-term.

"There still is an open question of whether people are going to stay and what people are going to do about school and what people are going to do about neighborhoods," Silverman said. "I'm a strange outlier perhaps because we got married, had a child



Daniel Montingelli and Kate Bush with Judy; they live in Palmer Woods.



Detroit families gathered to celebrate Chanukah at a JTot Detroit event.

and intend to stay; but it's not clear how many other people are in that cohort."

KATE BUSH & DANIEL MONTINGELLI

"I encourage anyone to live in the city — Jewish or not," said Kate Bush.

"It's like living in any city center; diversity is being part of a rich and truly dynamic history and a great sense of community."

Bush lives in Palmer Woods with her husband, Daniel Montingelli, a Montreal native, and their 3-year-old daughter, Judy. Bush and Montingelli rent the home where they have lived for the past 7½ years.

"I love everything about Palmer Woods," Bush said. "I love the beautiful homes and the families living here. We walk the neighborhood quite often, and I'm always discovering a hidden gem."

She said her neighbors are "fantastic," and they are a variety of ages. There are older families that have lived there for generations and middle-aged folks with kids in high school or college. She's also starting to

see more young families in the neighborhood. "It's quickly changing," she said.

A benefit of living in Palmer Woods is that it's an "extremely convenient neighborhood" located along the Woodward corridor north of Seven Mile. Montingelli is a math teacher at University of Detroit Jesuit High School and Academy, and his job is just a 1-mile bike ride away.

Bush especially appreciates nearby Palmer Park. She refers to it as a "rising star" in the city. The park's offerings include a garden, an apple orchard, yoga classes, and hiking and walking trails.

She has spent much of her life in the city. She has fond memories of growing up in the University District near the University of Detroit Mercy. She lived in a "beautiful" home in a "very diverse" neighborhood, and she still drives by the house regularly. She attended Golightly, a Detroit public school, for her elementary education. She went to Friends School for middle school, a Quaker school that closed this year, and the Roeper School in Birmingham for high

school.

However, living in Detroit as an adult wasn't initially her plan. Bush left the area after college, attending McGill University in Montreal. She lived in Canada for four years and then moved with Daniel, then her boyfriend, to Australia. They lived there for just three months when her father suffered a stroke and she returned to Detroit.

"We found a community here — a new community — because so many of my friends that I grew up with had moved away for college and didn't return afterward," she said.

Bush is a current member and former board member of the Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue in Detroit. She remains a "proud supporter," having recently planned a "tot Shabbat" led by Rabbi Dan Horwitz. A dozen families attended, and there are plans to have another one in the spring.

"I thought, 'How can I be involved in the synagogue at this stage in my life?' and creating some toddler programming seemed like a good fit," she said.

Bush is also an organizer of JTot Detroit. She has found the group to be a good opportunity to connect with other Jewish families living in the city, and she's "excited to see how it unfolds." Going in, she thought she would know all the families, but she has since met several folks.

"A lot of families are facing similar issues that we are as far as things we want our kids to have and that's having access to Jewish experiences that we don't necessarily have to shlep for," she said.

Judy had been attending a preschool in the Cass Corridor, but she switched to Temple Emanu-El in Oak Park to be closer to the digital advertising agency where Bush works. It is still undecided where Judy will go for her elementary education, but at this point it likely won't be Detroit Public Schools.

"My hope is that in the future it's a viable option, but the quality of education is just not the same right now," she said.

When asked if Detroit is experiencing a "resurgence" — Jewish and otherwise — Bush offers these thoughts: "It's attracting a lot of great media, and if that's going to help illustrate all the things the city has to offer to those who might not feel comfortable coming in, then that's a great thing. I just think words like 'resurgence' and 'reinvention' do an injustice to the rich history that the city has."

DAN & REBECCA YOWELL

"There are so many unique experiences," said Dan Yowell, describing living in Brush Park with his wife, Rebecca, and their 3-year-old son, Alexander.

"I always wanted to give Alex a broader and just more diverse experience," Rebecca added. "I love how he gets to interact with

SEAN COOK

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Steve Tobocman and Sharon Dolente with daughters Nia and Adiv; they live in Hubbard Farms.

different kids and the different activities we can go to.”

The Yowells own a condominium in Brush Park, north of Ford Field and Comerica Park, and have been there for nine years. They call their neighborhood a “great location.” It’s an ideal spot in that they can walk or bike to entertainment venues, restaurants and sports stadiums, but it’s not “right downtown” so there’s less activity. Also, they both drive to work; the freeway is easily accessible.

They describe their neighborhood as diverse; and they said there isn’t a majority in any age, race or ethnicity. There are older residents, but younger families have been moving into the area. Their neighbors are also Wayne State University students who rent from the condo owners.

“There are so many public spaces you can access and interact with people who aren’t your neighbors or your family members or close friends. Just getting out there and seeing all the different kinds of people,” Dan said.

Dan and Rebecca met while attending college at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. They stayed in Ann Arbor post-graduation, but eventually decided to move to Detroit to be closer to work and social activities. Dan was a teacher in Southwest Detroit at the time — he now teaches in Livonia Public Schools. Rebecca was working at Judson Center Wayne, located on the Detroit-Redford border. The couple were also visiting friends in Detroit on weekends. “It made sense to move,” Dan said.

Rebecca grew up in Flushing, a suburb of Flint, as one of the only Jewish students at her school. For this reason, she has made a special point to expose Alexander to Jewish activities from a young age.

The Yowells are also involved in

JTot Detroit. They attended the group’s Chanukah party in December, and they found the event welcoming and enjoyed the casual atmosphere. Alexander especially enjoyed singing holiday songs and playing dreidel.

As far as other Jewish activities, the Yowells are past members of the Downtown Synagogue. Also, they attended the recent “tot Shabbat” at the synagogue, and the family has been to Menorah in the D the past two years.

“Getting together with other Jewish families is really cool and a good experience for Alex,” Rebecca said. “We’re always looking for other kids in the city for Alex to play with — Jewish or non-Jewish.”

Alexander has yet to start school and the Yowells have discussed where to send him. They said the Detroit Public Schools are an option as Dan did his student teaching at DPS, and as a public school teacher he feels it’s important to support the district.

“It’s one of the questions we get almost all of the time when we tell people we live in Detroit: ‘Where are you going to send your son to school?’” Rebecca said. “When you live in the suburbs, you just send your kid to your neighborhood school and you don’t even have to think about it. In Detroit, at this time, you have to think about it and really do a lot of research and figure out what works best for your family.”

Dan added, “It isn’t as if there aren’t quality schools in the city — that definitely isn’t true at all. But there is some work involved and you don’t just go with the default necessarily.”

The Yowells encourage other families to move to the city. They said they would like to collaborate with other parents to make Detroit a more viable place to raise children.

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"I remember when we first moved here, and we heard all the excuses about moving: When there is less crime, then maybe we'll think about it. When the schools are better, then maybe we'll think about it. When the blight is taken care of, when the property values — all these barriers. At a certain point, you just have to step up and do it if you really believe it," Dan said.

"We've always looked at it as the 'chicken or the egg' argument where it's never going to get any better if we don't have well-educated active families who are choosing to get involved and bring their kid into the city and be involved in the community.

"We still need more people to move in. There's plenty of room for growth. It's just the beginning."

STEVE TOBOCMAN & SHARON DOLENTE

"There's a real sense of community in Southwest Detroit unlike anywhere else I've found in Michigan," said Steve Tobocman, a resident of Hubbard Farms. "Southwest Detroit speaks to me about what it means to be a member of a community and to care for our neighbors and to be engaged in a lifelong journey of making a difference."

He describes Hubbard Farms as "very beautiful" and "extremely diverse in almost every single way — racially, ethnically, somewhat religiously." He appreciates his neighbors, many of who, like him, are longtime residents who have worked in the nonprofit or government sectors or are entrepreneurs. Tobocman is the managing partner at New Solutions Group LLC, a consulting firm that specializes in public policy, social justice and nonprofit issues. He was also a representative in the Michigan Legislature from 2003-2008.

Other aspects of his neighborhood he enjoys include retail and grocery stores and coffee shops. Also, Clark Park is located in his neighborhood. He calls it a "vibrant" area, one that includes a hockey arena, baseball diamond and walking paths.

Tobocman grew up in Farmington Hills and attended Farmington Public Schools from kindergarten through eighth grade. He went to Cranbrook Schools for high school.

He attended the University of Virginia for college and then lived in Washington, D.C., for the following year. Tobocman returned to Michigan to attend graduate school at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He first began to spend significant time in Detroit in 1995, when he took a job with Southwest Detroit Business

Association, working on neighborhood economic development and community and economic issues.

In 1997, he moved to Detroit following graduation from U-M. He resided in Southwest Detroit beginning in 2001 and, a year later, purchased the home where he and his family now live.

His wife, Sharon Dolente, is originally from the Philadelphia area. Like Tobocman, she is a public interest lawyer. They have two children, Nia, 6, and Adiv, 3, who attend Detroit Waldorf School, a private school in Indian Village. Tobocman said Detroit Waldorf offers a unique education in that it focuses on holistic child development.

"We plan on staying in Southwest Detroit as long as we plan on living in Michigan," he said. "We've talked about what's in the best interest of the kids in terms of schooling, and we don't plan to move to the suburbs."

The family belongs to the Birmingham Temple in Farmington Hills. The temple is a 30-minute drive from Southwest Detroit, and they make the best of the commute by combining religious school with family time. Nia began Sunday school this school year, and Tobocman and Adiv visit his parents while she attends classes. As far as other formal Jewish involvement, Tobocman is a former board member of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Detroit.

Tobocman encourages other families — Jewish or not — to live in Detroit. He sees few drawbacks to living in the city, a vibrant, culturally rich place.

He feels some people's fear of urban spaces is often irrational and unfounded.

As someone who's lived and worked in the city for the better part of 20 years, he's never been the victim of a violent crime and the amount of property crime that he's experienced is "negligible."

"We spend so much time in society overdramatizing the safety issues," he said. "I think it's unfortunate that our society is dictated by some real divisions. We've made people afraid of each other who really don't need to be afraid of each other."

Tobocman said he doesn't identify with the word "pioneer" and the connotations that term brings with it.

Nowadays, in Detroit, it's not uncommon to find people like himself: educated, successful individuals who are motivated and inspired by urban and social issues who choose to live and work in the city.

"I'm just a normal person living in the city of Detroit," he said. "It's been a very, very interesting experience." *



An Engaging Figure

Detroit City Councilman Gabe Leland works closely with residents.

Eli Natinsky | Special to the Jewish News

It's all about getting local citizens involved in decisions that affect their community.

"I'm excited about this engagement process," said Detroit City Councilman Gabe Leland who represents District 7 in Northwest Detroit. "If I can create a community engagement process where there's a win on either side on every development that comes to my district and to Detroit, it would be the biggest accomplishment — not just in my career, but probably in my life."

On April 28, Leland hosted the final of three initial visioning sessions to spur dialogue between residents and the city on the future of the former O'Shea Playground, located at Greenfield Road and I-96. The gathering was held at Faith Redemption Center, Church of God in Christ in Detroit.

O'Shea is in Detroit's Grandale neighborhood, an area that borders I-96 to the north, Joy Road to the south, Greenfield Road to the east and M-39 to the west.

The park was dedicated in 1951 and decommissioned in 2011. It was then transferred to the city's planning and development

department.

A recreation center on the property also closed five years ago.

In March, the city entered into a lease agreement with DTE Energy for a 10-acre solar panel installation at O'Shea. Construction is to begin in late July or early August. The installation is expected to generate enough energy to power 450 homes in the neighborhood. Leland said it would be the second largest solar project of its kind in a U.S. urban area.

The park is 20 acres in all and this leaves 10 acres available for public use. Leland and his staff and the city's planning and development department are now determining, with the help of residents, what will be done with the additional space.

"For these visioning sessions, we really dug deep to decide the best use for the vacant land in this community and how we can make it all work together in the larger plan of a walkable community, a better-looking community," Leland said. "I think we're going to prove that a project like this can be inclusive of community

benefits. It's my job to meditate that."

GIVING CITIZENS A VOICE

In addition to the visioning sessions, the engagement process has included a SWOT (Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats) analysis. Residents were asked, "What do we do better than any other communities?" Some of the responses were touching: "survive and persevere" and "look out for each other." In addition, plans are under way to organize three teams of residents to focus on the areas of research, outreach and park design.

Leland is particularly impressed that residents took ownership of O'Shea after it closed by mowing the grass on the entire 20-acre site at their own expense and without prompting by the city. For that reason, he feels they are "owed" something of value at the park.

"This community has residents who are incredible human beings, helping each other and stepping up to make life better for their community and for the city," Leland said.

He hopes the solar array can be the start of something bigger for

the community — more funding, more infrastructure and more employment opportunities.

"When I heard about this project, that DTE was thinking about looking at vacant land to do a project like this, I said, 'Wow, maybe we can use this as leverage to bring about other opportunities for funding from nonprofits, from governments, from different venues,'" Leland said.

"I think this thing could be a catalyst for this area where you create a new identity and say, 'Can Grandale be the next green community? Can Grandale take an asset like this and turn it into something in such a positive way where you now have this community that's known for green infrastructure, green technology, green jobs?'" he added.

Leland said engaging with residents was a "learning process." He wanted to encourage people living in the neighborhood to come to the visioning sessions and talk about the O'Shea project as well as other quality-of-life issues. His concern is that if there isn't an open dialogue between residents and the city, this lack of communication will turn to anger and impede progress.

"It's a whole dynamic that a lot of communities struggle with when it comes to this new level of development," Leland said, "because it's happening before our city, it's happening before our eyes, and it's very exciting. But residents need to be at the table, and we need to know how to get them there."

Willie Johnson is a Grandale resident who lives a block away from O'Shea. He said he hasn't been involved in local politics before, but he came to two of the visioning sessions as the development affected him personally given its proximity to his home. Johnson was quite engaged at the meeting, directing several questions to Leland, his staff, DTE Energy, and representatives from the city's planning and development department.

Now that city council members are elected by district rather than solely at large, he expects it will make these officials more accountable to their constituents. Johnson said the visioning sessions are a positive first step, and the meetings are, to his knowledge, the first that have been held in this neighborhood.

Johnson was particularly impressed that Leland started the

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Gabe Leland, 34

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- First Jewish council member since 1997.
- Former Michigan State Representative, 2004-2010. Represented District 10.
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meeting on time and then stayed after to talk to residents.

“He’s extending himself to the community,” Johnson said. “I appreciate that.”

LELAND’S APPROACH

“We have to do a lot more of these engagement sessions — it’s my tikkun olam for Grandale,” Leland said, referring to the concept in Judaism of acts of kindness to perfect or repair the world.

“The role of an elected official gives me the opportunity to listen and assist in making people’s lives better.”

Leland “absolutely” connects his Jewish background with his decision to go into public service as well as his level of dedication to his work.

He and his family attended Kehillat Israel Congregation in Lansing while he was growing up, and his summers were spent at Habonim Camp Tabvor in Three Rivers, Mich. He currently belongs to the Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue in Detroit.

Leland’s parents are Burton and Rosanne Leland. Burton is a former Michigan state representative and Michigan state senator who represented Northwest Detroit. He now serves on the Wayne County Commission representing District 6.

Both of Leland’s parents have masters’ of social work degrees, and this also influences his strategy when it comes to public service. He said his father incorporated social work into his role as an elected official by helping people with small issues that affected their quality of life and, as councilman, he makes a point to do the same.

“Leadership has always been a big part of my upbringing,” he said. “My parents and Jewish leaders throughout my life have made me who I am.”

Leland pairs his parents’ guidance with his own education and training, having earned a bachelor’s degree in public administration with a focus in community development from Central Michigan University.

“City council is the most basic level of government — that’s not just in the city of Detroit, but everywhere,” he said. “You’re in the trenches. Everything you do is impacting people’s lives, and I take that very seriously.”

Joyell Lewis is a community coordinator on Leland’s staff. She’s been with the councilman for two years. They have known one another for more than 10 years, since they both worked for the Michigan House of Representatives. He was a state representative while another house member employed her.

Lewis is one of seven people who work for Leland and one of three who work in a community engagement capacity. She’s closely involved with neighborhood block clubs and local nonprofits as well as Detroit’s Department of Neighborhoods. She acts as the councilman’s “eyes and ears,” conveying constituent concerns to him.

Lewis describes Leland as “laid back” with a “lot of energy” and a “big heart for the community.”

She particularly enjoys walking the neighborhood with the councilman and talking to residents. This is something Leland and Lewis first did together when she worked on his campaign for city council three years ago. She refers to it as “knocking on doors,” and it helps ensure people receive information “more organically.”

“He’s a great person, a great joy to work with,” Lewis said. “He makes sure we don’t miss a beat as far as keeping the community engaged with our office.” *

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Full Circle

For Elana Freedman, finding her birth mom completes a lifelong dream.

Eli Natinsky | Special to the Jewish News

I'm thankful I got to meet and I got to know my birth mother; it's always been a dream of mine," said Elana Freedman of Farmington.

Elana met her biological mother, Evelyn "Evie" Jackson of Douglassville, Pa., last June 23, her 26th birthday. Steve and Joan Freedman of West Bloomfield adopted Elana a few days after she was born in 1989 at Abington Memorial Hospital in Abington Township, Pa. Both Douglassville and Abington Township are in the Philadelphia area.

It was an emotional reunion for both Elana and Evie, one that Elana describes as a scene out of a "Hallmark" movie. Evie drove 10 hours from Pennsylvania to Michigan with her boyfriend, Rainer, to see Elana. The gathering took place in downtown Farmington. When they first spotted each other, they ran to meet, hugged and wept.

"I couldn't stop crying and looking at her," Evie said. "We look so much alike it's ridiculous. It's funny that all these years I wondered what she looked like, and she looks just like me."

Steve has seen a video of that moment, and he describes it as "extraordinarily powerful."



Elana Freedman with her birth mother, Evie Jackson



Elana Freedman with her adoptive parents, Joan and Steve Freedman

"Joan and I were both very happy for her because this was a dream of hers for many, many years," he said.

Elana and Evie had lunch that day, and Steve and Joan joined them for dinner that evening. It was the first time Elana's biological mother and her adoptive parents had met.

"When Evelyn got to meet Joan and Steve, my adoptive parents, she had comfort knowing that I was safe and that I was with a good family," Elana said.

SEARCHING FOR EVIE

"I've always wanted to know who my birth mother was ever since I was able to understand what adoption meant," Elana said. "I've always wanted to know who she was, what she looked like — I had all the questions one would want to know."

Elana's was a closed adoption. The American Pregnancy Association defines a closed adoption as "an adoption process where there is no interaction of any kind between birth mothers and prospective adoptive families. This means that there is no identifying information provided either to the birth families or adoptive families."

Steve and Joan always made a "conscious decision" to tell Elana she was

adopted, and her curiosity about her birth mother emerged early on. Elana recalls coloring when she was a small child and asking Steve and Joan, "Does she like to color, too?" Evie was the "she" to which Elana referred.

"Throughout her entire childhood, this was a concern for her," Steve said. "She always wanted to find her birth mother. So that was part of her childhood. That did factor into raising her because those were conversations we had with her."

However, Steve and Joan did express some concern that such a meeting might be fraught with complications.

"We wanted to wait until she was old enough because we didn't know what could happen," Joan said. "We were always fine with it once she reached a certain age where she was able to manage whatever came her way."

Elana tried to find Evie through more traditional means such as family court, but that didn't pan out. Joan was also curious about Evie and helped with the search. Joan eventually learned Elana's birth mother's name was Evelyn Jackson.

Now that Elana had found her birth mother's name, she was able to locate Evie on Facebook. Confident that Evie was

indeed her biological mother, Elana sent her a message in February of last year explaining she was her biological daughter. She asked if she was interested in forming a bond or providing medical information — family medical history is another reason adopted children seek out their birth parents. However, Elana and Evie weren't Facebook friends, so Elana's email went to Evie's secondary message folder rather than her primary one.

Two months passed and Elana hadn't heard back, so she sent Evie a friend request. Evie saw that Elana was originally from the same region — Elana moved with her family from the Philadelphia area to Metropolitan Detroit in 2003 — and, intrigued by the local connection, she added Elana to her network.

At that point, Elana's message from two months earlier came through. When Evie read Elana's email, tears flowed. Evie had also thought about Elana during the years. There were even times when she would observe young women in public and wonder if one of them was the little girl she gave up for adoption years before.

"She was in awe," Elana said. "She was in so much shock and so much relief that I was looking for her because she was also looking for me. She wanted to know where I was and that I was OK."

Evie had seen similar family reunion stories on TV shows such as *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, but she didn't think it would happen to her. Yet, Evie did have a sense that Elana might seek her out one day, and that was one of the reasons she listed her maiden name rather than her married name — she's now divorced — on Facebook.

"Thank goodness for social media," Evie said. "If it wasn't for Facebook, I never would have found her."

GROWING UP JEWISH

"I feel so proud to be Jewish," Elana said. "You feel like you belong to something great."

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Steve and Joan are Jewish, so Elana was raised in her adoptive parent's faith. Evie is Christian, however, so had Evie nurtured Elana, she would have known Christianity. Elana refers to herself as "Jewish by conversion."

"My birth mother may not have been Jewish, but Judaism is all I've ever known," she said.

Some of the many aspects of Judaism that Elana appreciates include the culture, the traditions, the teachings of the Torah and the history of the Jewish people. She also has a love for Israel, having traveled there with her family in 2005.

Evie said she didn't know Elana had been adopted by a Jewish family and raised Jewish until they reunited, but she said it "doesn't matter" to her. Evie has had friends of different faiths throughout her life and religious persuasion has never had any bearing on her relationships.

"Religion doesn't change who you are — we're all the same," Evie said. "It doesn't matter what anybody believes in. It doesn't affect my outlook on people."

Joan and Steve note that Elana is a "spiritual child" who has the capacity to embrace various religious traditions.

"I imagine had she been raised in a Christian home where she had those kind of opportunities that would have spoken to her as well because that's just who she is," Steve said.

Judaism has framed Steve and Joan's perspective on adoption. They belong to B'nai Israel Synagogue in West Bloomfield, and both are educators at Hillel Day School in Farmington Hills.

"In the Jewish tradition, which we believe is very wise, the parent is the person who raises the child, not gives birth to the child," Steve said. "Birth is an event that happens once, raising a child is forever."

The Freedmans also have two sons and a daughter.

A BOND IS FORMED

"There's definitely a tie between the two of them," Steve said, referring to Elana and Evie.

Elana and Evie have continued to keep in touch since their meeting last summer. They often exchange messages on Facebook, as well as text and talk on the phone. Elana said they "definitely" plan to see each other again.

Last holiday season, Elana was surprised to receive more than two dozen small gifts from Evie ("One for every year I missed," she said.). The package came with a card that wished Elana both "Merry Christmas" and "Happy Chanukah."

Birth mother and birth daughter have learned they have much in common. Besides a shared appearance that includes eye color, skin tone and facial structure, their personalities are also somewhat alike.

"Elana's outgoingness, the bubbli-ness, the desire to help people — a lot of that comes from me," Evie said.

In addition, they have several of the same interests, including fitness, dogs and motorcycles. Elana said they are still getting to know each other and look forward to discovering other connections.

Elana has also become close to Evie's other biological daughter, Christina, and Elana would like to meet her biological father at some point.

Both Elana and Evie hope their story will motivate others who are searching for loved ones, especially those who are also involved in closed adoptions.

"I want to inspire other people," Elana said. "If you are searching for your birth parent or a sibling or whoever — don't give up." *

Adoption Help

Jewish Family Service of Metropolitan Detroit (JFS) in West Bloomfield provides personalized social and mental health services to individuals and families in the Metropolitan Detroit area.

One of JFS' offerings was an adoption program that was discontinued eight years ago, said Ellen Yashinsky Chute, JFS' senior director of behavioral health services. Hundreds of children were placed with parents in the years the service was in existence. The organization now refers adoption queries to outside agencies, including Child & Parent Services Inc. in Bingham Farms.

"Adoption is a very pertinent issue in the Jewish community," said Yashinsky Chute.

JFS does serve those who may have issues stemming from the fact they were adopted. Yashinsky Chute oversees a staff of 15 mental health therapists, including herself, who provide outpatient counseling.

"Adoption might not be the primary reason people seek counseling, but it comes out in counseling — it does affect people," Yashinsky Chute said.

To learn more about JFS, visit jfsdetroit.org, call (248) 592-2300 or email resourcecenter@jfsdetroit.org. Find out about adoption resources by visiting [Child & Parent Services Inc.](http://Childandparentservices.com) at childandparentservices.com or call (248) 646-7790.