

Local

Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation fuses tradition with progressive values

By Emily Gordon

For many northwest Ohioans, the city of Ann Arbor is like Toledo's younger sibling — an artsy college student living not too far away who can always be counted on for great food and music recommendations, a lively debate, and a fun night out.

If that younger sibling was Jewish, says Rebecca Kanner, they might attend Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation.

AARC is one of four Reconstructionist congregations in Michigan, grown from a *havurah* (fellowship) that began meeting in 1993 in members' homes for lay-led services, discussions, and celebrations, said Kanner, co-chair of the board of directors.

"The thought was that Jews were more than a religion, that we were a civilization and that Jews can create community through more than just in the synagogue," she said. "It was a very grassroots, informal yet very participatory effort."

Leadership roles rotated and decisions were made by a consensus of the entire membership, which started with about 20 people.

"Many of those founding members and those who joined shortly after are still members today. They are curious, have drive, and a can-do attitude for helping the community to have a vibrant, Jewishly mean-

ingful life," said Rabbi Ora Nitkin-Kaner, who has been with the congregation since 2017.

Now settled down in the Jewish Community Center with a religious school, two services a month including Fourth Friday Kabbalat Shabbat and potluck with *tot shabbat*, engaging adult learning classes, and a wide range of activities, AARC has approximately 80 member households.

However, the congregation still retains the cozy nature of the *havurah*, Kanner said.

"We're a very open, welcoming, very participatory congregation. We love to sing, so we sing a lot at our services," she said. "We also have very creative, skilled members who have made things for us such as our Ark, Torah cover, and a yad."

Reconstructionist Judaism is an interesting marriage of tradition and open-mindedness to change, Kanner said, citing the core tenet of the denomination's founder Mordecai Kaplan, "the past has a vote, not a veto."

The American Jewish denomination is notable for being both politically and religiously progressive. According to My Jewish Learning, Kaplan "was the first American rabbi to preside over a public bat mitzvah celebration — for his daughter, Judith, in 1922 — and the move-

ment's rabbinical seminary was the first to accept openly gay students."

AARC's focus on inclusivity reflects Reconstructionist Judaism's past and eye on the future, noting their congregation's yearly theme for 2020 is "radical welcoming and inclusivity," said Nitkin-Kaner.

"We're thinking and rethinking how to make our congregation more welcoming to everybody, including Jews by choice, Jews of color, and interfaith families, how to make our spaces have maximum accessibility for those with disabilities," she said. "We're working with Keshet (an American Jewish LGBTQ organization) to not just be tolerant but actively embracing LGBTQ Jews. We have a committee working on Pride Shabbat. We're trying to be as inclusive as possible. It's something we're proud of."

There's a lot to kvell over at AARC, Nitkin-Kaner says, though she admits her bias with a laugh.

"This congregation is really special. It's a little bit of a joke among rabbis and congregational leadership that we all say our congregation is 'warm and welcoming.' It's on everyone's website," she said. "But I think we truly are. We've heard that feedback again and again from people who visit and then decide to join and become members."

AARC makes sure every mem-

ber has a Seder to go to on Pesach (Passover) and a place to light candles for at least one night of Hanukkah, Nitkin-Kaner noted.

The congregation also collaborates with Lansing's Reconstructionist congregation Kehillat Israel and other Ann Arbor synagogues for shabbat services.

High Holiday services, held at the more spacious facilities of the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor, are ticketed and open to all.

There are approximately 100 Reconstructionist congregations and *havurot*, mostly in the United States. Although there are three in Ohio, AARC is the closest to Toledo.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the congregation is conducting services and programming exclusively online for the time being. Those interested in updates and links to resources are encouraged to visit www.aarecon.org/covid-19-information-resources.

When the need for social distancing has come to an end, Nitkin-Kaner welcomes Jewish Toledoans to visit the congregation for a service, class, or celebration. Those who would like to call or write ahead of their visit can contact Gillian Jackson, events and communications coordinator, at AARCGillian@gmail.com.

Synagogue Administrator Needed

Congregation B'nai Israel is seeking a detail-oriented member of the community to serve as Synagogue Administrator. The ideal candidate will have a business background, computer and leadership skills as well as personnel management abilities. A background and understanding of Jewish customs and observances will prove helpful as well. This is a fulltime, yet flexible position that may require evening and weekend work. The responsibilities of this position are varied and the ability to appropriately prioritize and multi-task will prove valuable as well. Individuals interested in hearing more about this opportunity to provide administration and assistance to a congregation with over 150 years of remarkable history, please email resumes to: ctraugott@cbitoledo.org.

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