CJP Honors
‘Movers and Shakers’

SHELLEY A. SACKETT
Jewish Journal Staff

BOSTON — On January 31, at the Renaissance Waterfront Hotel in Boston, the Combined Jewish Philanthropies’ Chai in the Hub will recognize 18 movers and shakers from Boston’s 45-and-under crowd and acknowledge their outstanding contributions to their community. Among the winners are rabbis, community organizers, a former IDF Special Forces officer, a documentary filmmaker and a composer.

“Jewish Boston is unlike any other urban Jewish landscape for young adults. It is open, creative, diverse and more collaborative across institutions than any other city I’ve lived in, thanks largely to CJP,” said honoree Rabbi Matthew Soffer, associate rabbi at Temple Israel of Boston and director of the Riverway Project, their initiative that connects young adults to Judaism.

Fellow recipient Elisha Gechter, of Cambridge, who was instrumental in starting the Eser young adult learning series and teaches “Parenting Through a Jewish Lens” classes, agrees. “Receiving this honor brought something unexpected — many colleagues, volunteers and students with whom I work closely took time to write to me and express what my contributions have meant to them. This was incredibly moving to me,” she said. Gechter also manages the Wexner Israel Fellowship at the Harvard Kennedy School and volunteers with the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts and Minyan Tehillah.

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Nominees can be volunteers, philanthropists, Jewish professionals, spiritual leaders or anything in between. “There is no cookie cutter winner. They are all involved in a variety of ways and influencing others along the way,” said Stephanie Whitehorn, CJP Program and Development Officer for the Young Adult Initiative, which sponsors this event.

Criteria are loose. Nominees must be between 22 and 45 years old and involved in the Jewish community in some way. Other than that, they cannot be CJP professionals, executive directors of CJP partner organizations, or self-nominated. “We accept any and all nominations aside from those restrictions,” Whitehorn said.

There is a confidential selection committee made up of professionals and volunteers.

Ohad Elhelo was a combat intelligence officer in the Israeli Defense Force and is passionately committed to sharing that experience with Boston's Jewish community. He speaks frequently to donor groups, congregations and students. “I share my visions for the future and how important it is to build platforms for Israelis, Palestinians and Jewish Americans to communicate with each other,” he said.

“I highlight the same message to any audience I speak to: The infrastructure of terror in Gaza is not only Hamas, but rather also poverty, ignorance, hopelessness and the lack of political horizon,” Elhelo said, adding, “Then I ask them (and myself) — what can we do in order to create a new infrastructure of hope for Israelis and Palestinians?”

When he gave a speech at the “Stop the Terror” rally at Boston City Hall Plaza last summer, it went viral. “I realized that the demand for the voices of my generation is huge, and decided to dedicate a significant amount of time to delivering my message. I look at it first as a responsibility, then as a privilege and lastly as a chance to get to know the amazing Jewish community of Boston better,” he said.

For Alison Kaufman of Waltham, it’s all about tikkun olam (repairing the world). The Director of Hunger and Nutrition at Jewish Family & Children’s Service of Greater Boston is committed to integrating a nutritional focus into Family Table, New England’s largest kosher food pantry. Over 3,000 volunteers sort, pack and deliver groceries, taking advantage of a hands-on opportunity to improve the lives of others.

“Family Table is enriching for volunteers who know they are making a difference and we also hear from clients that they feel cared for and not forgotten by the Jewish community,” Kaufman said.

Amy Geller, artistic director of the Boston Jewish Film Festival, credits CJP’s mentorship and support as integral to the success of FRESHFLIX, the BJFF initiative that reaches out to young adults. “As a secular Jew, it’s been really important to me to maintain the founding vision of making BJFF as open and welcoming to anyone and everyone who identifies Jewishly,” the Bostonian said.

The winners will be honored with a plaque at the Chai in the Hub event, which will feature special guest Jeffrey Tambor of “Arrested Development,” “The Hangover” and “Transparent.” They were also invited to an exclusive wine and cheese celebratory evening in December to meet one another.

Because this is only the second year the award has been given, Whitehorn said that she is still working on adding different opportunities for the winners, such as being featured in the monthly CJP Young Adult newsletter or possibly in Jewishboston.com blogs. These are not firmed up as of yet.

For entrepreneur and American Jewish Committee volunteer Josh Fialkoff of Jamaica Plains, the Chai in the Hub award is humbling. “I hope this award inspires others to volunteer in the Jewish community. I am proud to be part of a community that values and honors community service,” he said.

To read all the winners’ bios, go to cjp.org/chai-in-the-hub.