

Koonins Help JELF Build Winning Brand

BY MARCIA CALLER JAFFE AUGUST 25, 2015

Over 315 people gathered Wednesday, Aug. 19, at **Maggiano's Buckhead** to salute the good works of the **Jewish Educational Loan Fund** with featured speaker Steve Koonin, the CEO of the **Atlanta Hawks**.

The first star of the evening was **Georgia Tech** senior Rivka Jacobs, a JELF recipient majoring in biomolecular chemistry, who emotionally explained how the interest-free loan has pushed her professionally, personally and Jewishly.

Jacobs' mother, a labor and delivery nurse, was asked to adopt her literally at her birth. Parents Rachel and Gary Jacobs relished the opportunity to raise her but already had college-age children, depleting the family's ability to pay college tuition when Rivka's turn came.



Introduced by his vivacious wife and JELF activist, Eydie, Koonin took center stage and shared his work experience with Coke and TNT/Turner Broadcasting, leading to his leadership role with the Hawks.

“Building a winning brand” encompassed Koonin’s vision for the Hawks after he handled the crises involving racial comments by one of the former owners and the general manager. Under the new ownership group led by Tony Ressler, Koonin wants the Hawks to “excite and unite” while he brings in a more diverse, loyal customer base, primarily in the 18-to-44 age range.

Koonin challenged the audience to connect with the hometown Hawks. The **University of Georgia** grad also took a humorous jab at Jacobs by referring to Georgia Tech as a “trade school.” Jacobs shot back: “I’ll take that with a grain of salt.”

The Koonins volunteered to match the donations made that night, up to \$20,000.

JELF supporter Dr. Ramie Tritt said, “I believe in helping those willing to work hard towards building a better future.”

JELF board President Rob Rickles said, “When people get involved with JELF, it helps take us to the next step in community visibility — and more students in need can be helped.”

JELF Vice President Stan Lowenstein noted that JELF offers “final dollar” loans to Jewish students from Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia and has a 99 percent repayment rate.

JELF has been led for just over a year by Executive Director Jenna Shulman, who had been with another educational organization, the Atlanta office of **ORT America**, for nearly a decade. She is one of the 25 nonprofit innovators recognized this summer by the Atlanta Jewish Times.

Through JELF, the Jewish community is stepping up to help those with a true financial need. While JELF lent out \$800,000 this year, the organization fell \$200,000 short of its applicants' needs.

JELF supporters and community members like Eydie Koonin participate in JELF's loan review process, held at multiple times throughout the year, to make the difficult decisions about how to allocate the loan funds.