

Exhibition traces the story of JELF from its beginnings as the Hebrew Orphans Home

In August, Jewish Educational Loan Fund (JELF) will celebrate its 141-year history with the opening of “The Legacy of the Hebrew Orphans’ Home: Educating the Jewish South since 1876,” an interactive exhibition that will be on display at The Breman Museum through January 2018. JELF is partnering with The Breman Museum, The Temple, and Kennesaw State University for this exciting enterprise.

Exhibition curator Dr. Catherine Lewis, of Kennesaw State University, along with JELF staff and volunteers, combed JELF’s archives and the files of its predecessors, the Hebrew Orphans’ Home and Jewish Children’s Services, all of which are housed at The Breman, to put together a fascinating look at the oldest non-profit in the state of Georgia. The exhibit provides both a look into the history of the Atlanta Jewish community and the roots of Jewish benevolence in the South.

In 1889, the doors to the Hebrew Orphans’ Home first facility opened at 478 Washington Street, in downtown Atlanta, not far from where Turner Field is located. The orphanage was started by a group of men (many of whom were members of The Temple), as well as Simon Wolf of Washington D.C., an influential businessman, who submitted a resolution to finance it. The Home’s first endowment fund was established by Simon Wolf and others in 1901.

The Home served nearly 60 Jewish children, ages four to 18, from all over B’nai B’rith’s Fifth District (District of Columbia, Maryland, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia), who had lost one or both of their parents. More than just a placement facility, the Home served as a vital presence in these children’s lives, attending to their general health, education, religious



Postcard of the Hebrew Orphans’ Home, circa 1920

studies, acquisition of life skills, and even their long-term well-being. Atlanta resident Dr. Stephen Garber has strong memories of the stories he was told by his father, Al Garber, as well as his aunts, Janet Garber Goldstein and Freida Garber Nadel, all of whom grew up at the Home and attended religious school at The Temple.

In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt advocated that orphaned children not be institutionalized, but rather placed with relatives or in another family environment. By 1930, all of the children living in the Hebrew Orphans’ Home had been placed with foster care families, and the residence facility closed. The name of the organization was changed to Jewish Children’s Services (JCS), to better reflect its new mission. JCS continued funding and overseeing the foster home placements of Jewish children throughout the same five-state region it had always served.

After World War II, JCS helped the new wave of European immigrants who came to the South, such as Heinz “Henry” Birnbrey.

In 1936, at 13 years of age, Henry came to Birmingham as a refugee from Germany and was placed in the foster care system. Henry lived with several foster parents, first in Birmingham and then Atlanta. JCS was responsible for his care and well-being from 1936 through 1943, when he was drafted into the military.

Along with Dr. Stephen Garber, Henry will be one of JELF’s featured panelists at the grand opening of the exhibition, August 24, starting at 6:00 p.m. Other panelists include Dr. Caroline Light, a Harvard professor and author, who wrote her dissertation on the Hebrew Orphans’ Home and has spent decades studying Jewish benevolence in the South, and Sherry Frank, the former, longtime executive director of the Atlanta Jewish Committee, a parent, and grandparent of JELF recipients.

Around 1961, JCS began assisting college students who struggled to fund their post-secondary education, supplementing their in-house JCS scholarships with assets from the original Simon Wolf Endowment



Children from the Hebrew Orphans’ Home on a field trip at the Loew’s Theatre in Atlanta, circa 1931

Fund. A new committee was formed to establish guidelines for educational loans. It was decided that these educational loans would be interest-free and need-based, the same criteria that JELF upholds to this day. In 1989, the organization formally changed its name to the Jewish Educational Loan Fund to better reflect its new mission.

Since the 1960s, JELF’s priority has been assuring that Jewish college-age students complete their degrees. Today, the organization serves hundreds of students each year who are pursuing their higher education. This exhibition will connect the dots for many who are unaware of JELF’s long history of community service. “Across three centuries, JELF has helped Jewish students in need achieve their full potential,” says Board President Marianne Garber. “We hope that many in the community and beyond will join us on August 24, or sometime throughout the fall, to learn more about this incredible movement.”

For more information about this exhibition, visit jelf.org/exhibit.