

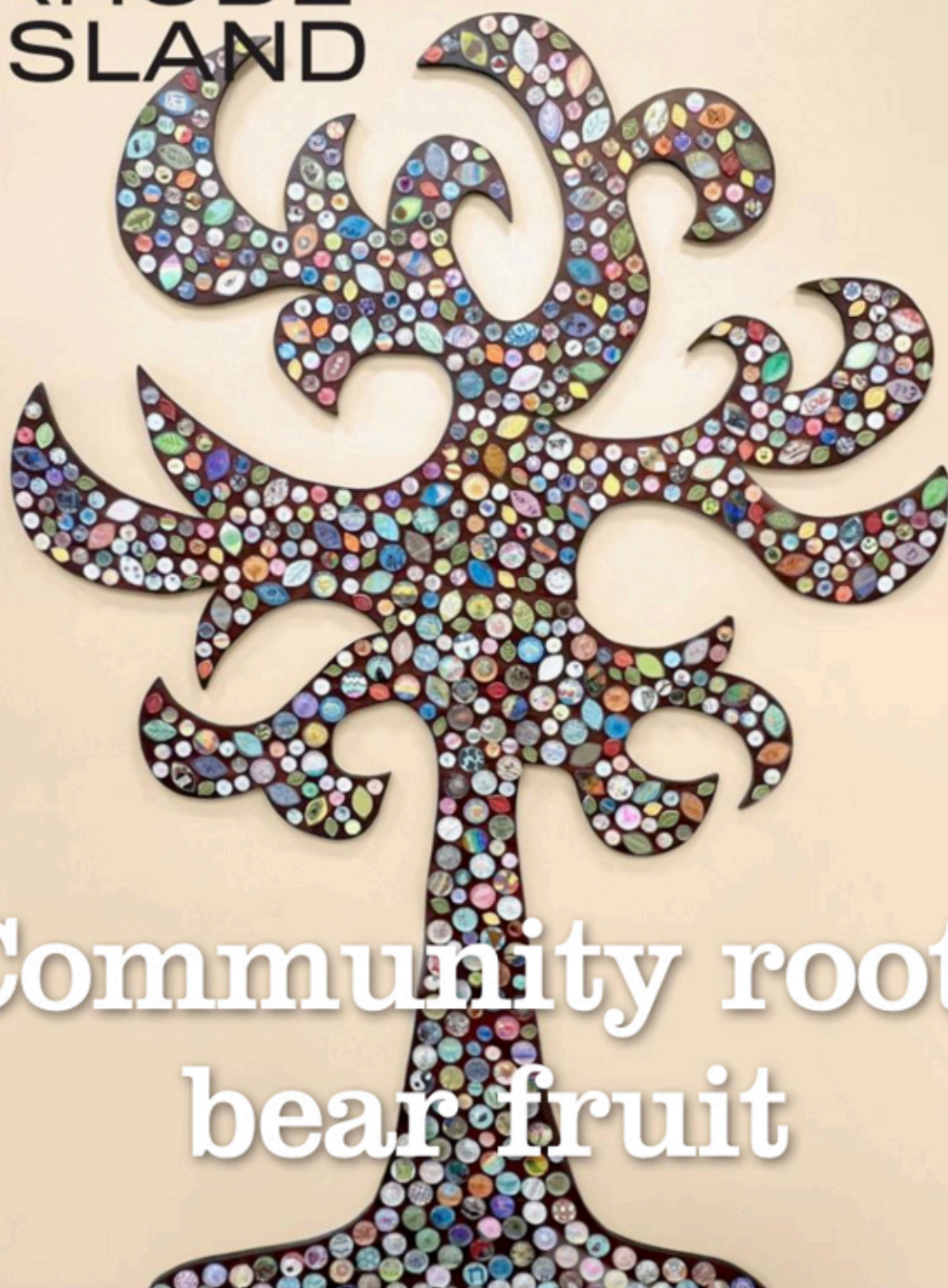
The Voice of Greater Rhode Island's Jewish Community

JEWISH

JANUARY 2022 | SHEVAT 5782
JEWISHRHODY.ORG



RHODE
ISLAND



Community roots bear fruit

**Local congregations
mark online
successes**

**These pop culture
stories were tops
in 2021**

**J-Fitness trainers
offer healthy
eating tips**

COMMUNITY

Jewish Roots sculpture on display at JCC

BY ROBERT ISENBERG

PROVIDENCE – Two years after the idea was conceived, the Jewish Roots Project is now complete. The sculpture, shaped like a tree and encrusted in glass “gems,” now hangs prominently in the entryway of the Alliance’s Dwares Jewish Community Center. Each gem is unique, the creation of a Rhode Islander sometime during the pandemic.

“Every gem has a story,” says Nancy Katz, the Cranston-based artist who spearheaded the Jewish Roots Project. “Because things played out the way that they did in terms of the pandemic, I think it captured a time that ... we’re living through right now.”

More than 238 adults participated in the project, representing about 48 “geographic areas” across the state. Organizers estimate that some 250 students also contributed to Jewish Roots, most of them from J-Camp and J-Cation Camp, at the Dwares JCC. Together, they submitted

more than 1,000 gems, most of which were then arranged and pasted onto the tree.

Katz is a Worcester, Massachusetts, native who spent much of her life away from New England, first working as an occupational therapist and then as a full-time visual artist and arts educator.

In the 1980s, Katz was an early participant in the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt, putting her skilled needlework and concern for others to work. Since then, she has built a reputation for her community workshops and art projects, many of them grounded in Jewish themes.

One of those projects was a similar tree, created for Temple Sinai, in Sandy Springs, Georgia. The tree was one of the finishing touches for a major renovation, at the behest of synagogue educator Marisa Kaiser.

“It was really a collaboration,” recalls Katz. “They wanted something to engage their religious school students, and they needed to beautify, or personalize, this



new space that they were creating.”

Katz and her husband, stained glass artist Mark Liebowitz, moved to Rhode Island in 2019, and soon connected with the Jewish Alliance of Greater Rhode Island. They had previously lived in rural Massachusetts, where Jewish residents were scattered, and the Alliance gave them a chance to quickly connect with Rhode Island’s more robust Jewish community.

Here, Katz met Lisa Maybruch, the Alliance’s man-

ager of adult programs, who was fascinated by the newly completed Temple Sinai sculpture. They discussed trying a similar project at the Dwares JCC.

But within months, the world went into COVID-19 lockdown, and the Jewish Roots Project took on new significance: Instead of a typical community-building exercise, the sculpture was a chance to connect sequestered individuals across the state.

Katz and Maybruch put together project kits for participants, which included a visual template, tea bags for enjoying at home, and images of the Temple Sinai project.

“We had to look at this as a nurturing device, some way to help people during this crazy time,” says Katz. “They could see what the end result could look like. They knew that, ultimately, you’re going to create something, and it’s going to be part of this tree that’s in the lobby. And this is a way for you to connect with other people and the community at large.”

Participants could decorate the gems however they wanted, including with pictures, photos or written messages. The submissions ran the gamut of words and images, from the phrase “We

will hug again” to a picture of a dog wearing a yarmulke. Each piece of artwork was then encased in round glass pieces.

Area woodworker Aaron Guttin cut the tree out of wood, and Katz and Maybruch pasted the hundreds of gems to its trunk and branches.

The display was completed on Dec. 22, and can be viewed at the Alliance’s Dwares

Jewish Community Center, 401 Elmgrove Ave., Providence, whenever the JCC is open. Visitors must follow mandatory COVID-19 safety measures when entering the building.

ROBERT ISENBERG (*risenberg@jewishallianceri.org*) is the multimedia producer for the Jewish Alliance of Greater Rhode Island and a writer for *Jewish Rhode Island*.



Listen to Nancy Katz discuss the project and watch the tree being constructed at jewishrhody.com/stories/jewish-roots-project140037



www.nancykatzwilmark.com
413.455.4885