

Federations, Rutgers team to address Jewish future

by Debra Rubin
NJN Staff Writer
12.06.07

New Jersey's Jewish federations are teaming with Rutgers University in a five-month series of Jewish leadership seminars.

Lay leaders and professionals from each of the 12 federations will take part in the seminars, which will bring in scholars and national leaders to help participants grapple with pressing issues and create "a cadre of statewide leadership."

The New Jersey Jewish Leadership Forum, running through April, is a cooperative effort of the federations and Rutgers' Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life.

"The forum is an opportunity to see how the Jewish community in New Jersey is moving and changing, where the emphasis should be," said Bildner associate director Karen Small, who is coordinating the leadership think tank. "We're looking at it being not so much about specific issues but as a forum where the leadership of the federations can come together to strategize."

Jonathan Woocher, left, chief ideas officer for JESNA, the Jewish Education Service of North America, joins Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter, a Yeshiva University scholar, during the opening session of the New Jersey Jewish Leadership Forum Nov. 28 at Rutgers University.

The forum kicked off Nov. 28 on the university's New Brunswick campus with a dinner program outlining the major issues facing the Jewish community. The keynote speaker was Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter, professor of Jewish history and Jewish thought at Yeshiva University and a scholar at its Center for the Jewish Future.

Also addressing the participants was Rutgers University president Richard L. McCormick, who said the series of programs was an example of how Rutgers could "contribute to Jewish life and learning in our own state and community."

"We take great pride in our connection to our superb Jewish community," he said, calling the Bildner Center and the Jewish studies department "one of the jewels in the crown" of the university.

The next program, on Dec. 12, will focus on changing demographic trends in New Jersey. Future programs will be devoted to engaging the next generation, developing a caring Jewish community through a domestic agenda, Jewish education in and out of the

classroom, building Jewish peoplehood using Israel as an anchor, and the future of Jewish philanthropy.

The forum builds on a similar think tank formed in 2001 that over a two-year period focused on trends in Jewish philanthropy and public policy.

"The really new topic that's on the agenda this time is how to engage the next generation, which we see in Jewish federations across the state and country is a topic that is really being taken very seriously," said Small. "We're looking mostly at the post-college years; what will engage them when they don't have the structure of a Hillel."

The program will be facilitated throughout the year by Jonathan Woocher, chief ideas officer for JESNA, the Jewish Education Service of North America.

Yael Zerubavel, director of Rutgers' Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, chats with Schacter during the session.

He said the NJ federations are in the unusual position of being close enough geographically to make such get-togethers possible. "I can't think of anywhere else in the country where you have 12 federations in such a concentrated area," he said.

"We hope these leaders of the community come away with a broader and deeper understanding of the issues," said Woocher. "That's first and foremost. Our secondary goal is to build relationships with and among these leaders so they can work more effectively across community lines."

The seminars will take into account the differences among federations.

"There's a huge difference between a MetroWest and Cumberland County," said Woocher. "Many of the federation executives said they wanted to look at the whole issue of congregational education — what can we do to strengthen Jewish education for those not in day schools. That issue crosses community boundaries, yet it is different in a north Jersey community, where you may have dozens of synagogues, than in the south, where you may have only four or five."

Max Kleinman, executive vice president of United Jewish Communities of MetroWest NJ, said although it had been only some five years since the last leadership forum, events from 9/11 to the Intifada have changed the community landscape. "There is more change today than ever," he said. "We have to keep up."

Gary Aidekman, the incoming president of the MetroWest federation, said he wanted to gain "input into some of the issues we're all facing in the Jewish community in the United States and New Jersey."