



Lowen-Kaplan Award Winner: Laurie Stusser-McNeil

By Beth Am Communications Lead Rachel Román

This year's Lowen-Kaplan Award Recipient, Laurie Stusser-McNeil, is a Seattle native and has been a member since 2001 when she joined Temple Beth Am to send her children – Harris, now 23, and Coco, now 19 – to Religious School. She has been active in the temple community helping to connect members through various committees and projects. She was the chair of Project Hineyni, part of the Caring Community Committee, for 10 years. She also served on the Board of Directors for four years as well as on the Development Committee and the Welcoming Committee for both Rabbi Ruth A. Zlotnick and Cantor Victor Geigner. Laurie also extends her helping hand to her job as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher at Highline College in Des Moines, WA where she worked helping immigrants and refugees adapt to life in the US.

According to this year's Lowen-Kaplan Awards Committee – Sandy Berger, Barbara Droker, Jeremiah Isgur, Roger Kohn, and Ronnie Shure (last year's award recipient) – "Laurie has always been in the center of our community. She was in the center of our Caring Community...and our search for social justice. She was in the center of fundraising activities. The real question should be whether anyone at Beth Am has not been touched by her kindness and caring."

Beth Am Communications Lead Rachel Román asked Laurie why winning the Lowen-Kaplan Award and being a part of Temple Beth Am are so meaningful.

Rachel Román: How do you feel about winning this award?

Laurie Stusser-McNeil: It's more than an honor. I'm following amazing (past recipients), and I'm really grateful. It's a big deal to be honored in this way and be seen by people who I know and who I don't know. My volunteering at temple has been an interesting mix over the years. Each thing kind of led to the next thing. Most of it was about meeting and connecting with people.

RR: When did you first have that sense that you were a part of this community?

LS-MN: I graduated the Adult B'nai Mitzvah class in 2009, the same year that my son, Harris, had his Bar Mitzvah. It was very powerful, and a very special thing to have done. It helped ground that this is my temple, too; I'm not just here for my kids. That was a big step.

After graduation, I was asked to chant the Haftarah on Yom Kippur for three years. That was especially a challenge and quite an honor. It grounded me in a new way in the services, and I got to know another group of people from doing that.

RR: You joined with members of the temple community to attend the Temple Beth Am 2018 Civil Rights Trip. How did that impact you?

LS-MN: The Civil Rights Trip had a tremendous impact on me. My personal work developing as an anti-racist white person is ongoing. It was important to experience first-hand the spaces, monuments, voices, and exact locations so essential to the Civil Rights Era as part of my personal growth and understanding of racism in this country. Being in these places in a Jewish cohort added yet another layer. I continue to study, read, attend conferences, and explore issues of privilege and race. I no longer want to be a bystander.

RR: What was one of the programs that you felt made a big difference to members?

LS-MN: Project Hineyni (part of the Caring Community initiative) connects members to each other during difficult times. The Caring Community Committee has been a very special thing. I've written a lot of sympathy cards and challah cards, and I've made a lot of phone calls to people who were recently injured, ill, or experienced a loss. It's been very meaningful for people who receive them. It's a way to be seen and not feel invisible, especially during a difficult time.

RR: As part of the Welcoming Committee for Rabbi Ruth A. Zlotnick, what were some of your responsibilities?

LS-MN: I organized all of the house parties around the city for people to meet her. Ross (Kling) and I made sure that every area was covered. We also helped her and her family when they first arrived in Seattle; Ross and I were her people when she first got here. It was great to be that person for her to feel really comfortable.

RR: Were you involved in Religious School when your children were in it?

LS-MN: Oh, yes! I was very involved with the Religious School. I helped with the bake sale, Covenant Renewal planning, and a graduation party. There was lots of volunteering with the kids over the years.

RR: Why do you choose to be so involved?

LS-MN: All of these things that I've done have helped me build relationships. Plus, this is a membership organization, and I feel very strongly that we all have to do our part or it won't be here. The temple is its membership; if we don't all pitch in, then what happens? We're not just visitors here; it's our place, too.

RR: How would you like your volunteering to shape Temple Beth Am and the temple community?

LS-MN: Volunteering is a personal thing; I hope everyone can find their meaningful connection to doing something for the greater good. We all like to do different things. Specifically, I hope Project Hineyni soars – our Beth Am family deserves a robust caring community that connects people to each other. Simple acts can be so powerful, like writing cards, making calls, visiting, and touching people at a difficult time. Overall, I hope everyone would volunteer in some capacity to keep temple vital. It takes all of us!