

Path Finder

Former police officer turns to hospice work, Judaism

Judith Doner Berne

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It's no simple change of beat from police work to social work and from devout Catholic to practicing Jew. Rather, it's a path that Michael Walch found himself on, following retirement from the Southfield Police Department in November 2000, "25 years to the day" that he joined up.

Walch, 55, is director of the Shalom Providence and Palliative Care programs for Jewish Hospice and Chaplaincy Network (JHCN), West Bloomfield.

As the liaison between Providence Hospital, Southfield, and its Jewish patients, he fills requests for Jewish religious and culturally based services and provides education for the Providence staff on Jewish customs and ritual.

For JHCN's palliative care program, Walch coordinates in-patient and out-patient chaplaincy and social work services for people who are declining, but may not qualify for hospice care.

His attraction to hospice social work was the first, and likely, the easier transition. As for his conversion to Judaism, he didn't see it coming: "It was never on the radar."

Walch finds "strong parallels between police and social work." Both involve "being there for people at a time when they need it — reassuring people, having a calming influence."

Cop Career

His rise through the Southfield police ranks included working the streets as a beat cop, undercover officer and homicide detective before his prom-



Michael Walch amid Judaica in his Waterford home.

otions to sergeant, lieutenant and deputy chief of police.

"Mike applied a humanistic approach to police work," says Southfield Police Chief Joseph E. Thomas. "Whoever raised him made him a good person. He didn't command people — he earned the respect of people. He made things happen."

Although Walch enjoyed police administration, "the higher I went with the organization, my circle [of contacts] got smaller and smaller. I loved being a police officer and interacting with the public. Social work would allow me the opportunity to do that."

So he added a master's in social work from Wayne State University in Detroit in 2002 to his earlier degrees: a bachelor's in criminal justice from WSU, 1978; a diploma from the FBI National Academy, March 1993; and a master's of science in administration, Central Michigan University, 1993.

His second career includes stints as an oncology social worker at Providence Cancer Institute, as a hospice social worker at Odyssey Health Care Systems and a year or so after his conversion to Judaism, as program director of bereavement services at Jewish Family Service (JFS) in West Bloomfield.

Bereavement Program

"He was a pioneer," says Ellen Yashinsky Chute, now chief community outreach officer for JFS. "He was the first person in a program that was centered on bereavement issues. Michael was instrumental in reaching out to the community," moving beyond his clinical caseload.

Police investigation helped prepare him to reach out to the dying and to those who lose loved ones, Walch says, because "it's all about talking to people, being comfortable, going into someone's home."



Joyce Keller and Michael Walch

But there also is a difference. “In police work, you come in and stabilize things and you’re done. In hospice, you’re there and it’s not always comfortable,” he says. “When there’s an undercurrent of dysfunction in the family, it really comes out in crisis. Grief loss is the needle that pierces the balloon.”

Growing up and working in Southfield, a city with a significant Jewish population and Jewish institutions, “there was obviously influence through exposure to the Jewish community,” Walch says. His dad even taught a catechism class on the subject of “Knowing Your Jewish Neighbor.”

But in 1994 when he married Joyce Keller, then the longtime executive director of Farmington Hills-based JARC, Walch maintained the Catholicism he had been raised with as one of six children in a devout, close-knit family.

Winning a Friend

The two met after each graduated from Dale Carnegie training and got to know each other when they went back to work as Dale Carnegie assistants.

“We were married 10 years before I

converted,” says Walch, a graduate of Brother Rice High School in Bloomfield Township. “Joyce didn’t even know I was considering it. I had to scrape her off the wall.”

“It had nothing to do with me,” says Keller, who although raised as a conservative Jew acknowledges, “It was JARC [the Farmington Hills-based agency that advocates for people with disabilities] that kept me close to the Jewish community.”

But Walch said life with Keller had an influence as he learned more and more about Jewish ritual and culture. “I had a basic understanding, but not the nuances,” he said.

Their close friend Cheryl Guyer agrees with Walch. “Sitting around the holiday and Shabbat tables with family and friends, attending Temple Israel, seeing the dedication and work of JARC staff and volunteers and being with Joyce, Michael discovered a great depth of our community that took him to a higher level,” she says.

“He experienced the joys of being Jewish and now he is bringing that joy to all of us...inviting us to his sukkah, taking us to temple, sharing his stories about Jewish Hospice,” says Guyer, a Huntington Woods resident and past president of JARC. “Of course, there’s a downside to all of this,” she says. “Michael and Joyce were not at our seder this spring because Michael was leading his own.”

Joins Jewish Hospice

“My parents raised us with the abili-

ties to make our own decisions,” Walch says. “I just felt the need to go on a different spiritual path. Reform Judaism gave me just the right mix.”

In June 2007, Walch accepted an opportunity to direct Shalom Providence, the new JHCN program at Providence Hospital in Southfield, in some ways a link between his Catholic upbringing and the Jewish religion he adopted.

“Coming to us after working outside the Jewish community, in hospice and policing, he adds such perspective to our group,” says Rabbi E.B. (Bunny) Freedman, JHCN executive director.

Describing Walch as cool-headed, patient and receptive to change, Freedman says, “He helps me make good decisions.”

Walch has since cut down on his hours and often works out of his lakefront home in Waterford. Summer mornings may find he and Keller, who retired from JARC in 2008, waterskiing, biking or kayaking.

Active in Temple Israel in West Bloomfield, Walch chairs the social action committee and leads religious services at shivas; Keller is on the executive committee. They attend Friday night services and keep kosher.

“They come every Friday night and sit in the front row,” says Rabbi Marla Hornsten of Temple Israel. “It’s almost calming when you see them.”

“Michael told me, ‘If I do this, I’m taking you with me,’” Keller says. “If I brought a Jew into the world, he definitely brought one back. ■