

Letter to the community from Mitchell Bellman

NOVEMBER 13, 2009



The Jewish Federation of Ottawa strives to be representative of the entire Jewish community. Our desire is to unite the community and serve as the venue where members of the community can meet, share ideas, and work toward common goals that will improve the quality of life for everyone who wants to be a part of our great community and will help repair the world.

On November 5th, the Women's Campaign of the Federation held a successful Choices event. About 300 women from all parts of the community came together to be inspired, to meet other women and to support the Federation and the Jewish community of Ottawa. For many participants, attending Choices is their only connection to the Jewish community of Ottawa.

The keynote speaker for Choices, Brigitte Gabriel, was viewed in very different ways by those who participated. Some people heard her being critical of radical Islam based on her moving personal story of persecution as a Lebanese Christian whose life was saved in Israel. We have received many letters and calls to this effect. Others heard her speech as making unacceptable generalizations and promoting hate against all Arabs and Muslims. We have also received many letters and calls to this effect.

I was not in attendance at the event and do not have the benefit of a transcript or video of her speech but I do respect all the women who have come forward to express their views about what they heard and felt that evening. Subsequent to the event, I have reviewed videos and transcripts of Brigitte Gabriel's other speeches and I have seen her passionately describe her personal story. I have also heard her say things which, in my opinion, are unacceptable gross generalizations of Arabs and Muslims.

We do believe that it is legitimate to discuss the impact of radical Islam and terrorism and educate the community about its dangers. But in no way should that be generalized to all Muslims. In fact, our long involvement in interfaith dialogue and outreach to Ottawa's Muslim community demonstrates our commitment to building a more cohesive and understanding community in our city. In no way was it our intention to present offensive or dangerous generalizations and in no way is that reflective of our core values.

The Federation looks forward to using the controversy around the Choices event as a learning experience. We respect the intelligence of the community and we would welcome an open debate and discussion on the issues of what constitutes hate speech and how one can address issues such as radical Islam. We believe that a respectful debate could lead to a better understanding of why people heard such different messages in the same speech. We also intend to develop a clearer policy on how speakers are chosen for future community events. Our Communications and Community Relations Committee will work on such a policy and present it to the Board of Directors for approval. As with all Federation committees, we welcome the input of anyone in the community who would like to make suggestions or recommendations regarding the new policy or who would like to speak with the committee directly.

One of the things that makes the Ottawa Jewish community so special is the way we have remained united throughout our history. While other Jewish communities have significant rifts and divisions between organizations, religious denominations and political groups, we have managed to maintain a united community that embraces diversity and respect for one another. The Federation will continue to work to maintain and strengthen the ties that bond us together and engage in constructive dialogue when difficult issues arise.

Mitchell Bellman,
President & CEO
Jewish Federation of Ottawa

