



Interest Free Loan Program Celebrates a Decade of Success

- Sharon Chisvin

It was back in 2003 during JCFS's annual call for Passover assistance that community philanthropist Izzy Asper z"l became aware of just how many Manitoba Jews were facing financial challenges. Asper saw a problem and, as he was prone to do, decided to help the community fix it. The result of that decision was Asper and his son-in-law Michael Paterson, then Board President of Jewish Child and Family Service (JCFS), announcing the creation of The Asper Helping Hand Initiative (TAHHI) at JCFS a few months later.

Now in its 10th year, TAHHI is a loan program modeled after the many free loan societies that dotted the Winnipeg Jewish community landscape in the early part of the 20th century. The program provides interest-free loans to Jewish individuals and families in Manitoba who are experiencing temporary hardship and are in need of financial assistance. The loans range in value from \$1,000 to \$5,000, require a guarantor, and must be repaid within three years. To date, TAHHI has distributed more than half-a-million dollars in loans.

The program is funded by The Asper Foundation and by the David and Ruth Asper Fund at the Jewish Foundation of Manitoba. The Jewish Foundation of Manitoba also contributed to the launch of the program.

David Asper, Chair of The Asper Foundation, is also Chair of TAHHI Steering Committee. He commented, "Together with The Asper Foundation, Ruth and I support this program because it gives people the opportunity to help themselves. The Asper Helping Hand Initiative is different in that it promotes the values of becoming self-sufficient and independent, which in turn leads to a greater sense of human dignity."

The program has distributed 141 loans for a variety of needs, including tuition fees, resettlement costs, house and car repairs, vocational training and medical necessities. All of the loans are processed through the program's manager, Shelley Garfield.

"I am the only one really involved," Garfield explains. "I take the calls, conduct the interviews, send the application to the loan committee, prepare the documentation, disperse the funds and look after the payments and any other situations that arise until the loan is fully repaid."

"No names are ever passed on to the committee, but just the situations," Garfield adds. "Privacy and confidentiality is extremely important."

TAHHI receives about 50 to 80 loan requests a year, Garfield says, but many of the requests do not fit the program's strict criteria. In those instances, Garfield redirects the applicants to other resources or sources of assistance. All loan requests that do fit the criteria are reviewed by a committee comprised of the program's funders.

"I pass on the applicant's situation to our loan committee for approval. Again, names are never disclosed." Garfield explains. "Once I have an approval, I contact the applicant and set up a final meeting with them and their guarantor. The applicants and I discuss the repayment schedule for the loan and come up with a mutually agreed upon payment amount."

The applicant then leaves this meeting with the loan in hand.

While the loans themselves are, of course, greatly appreciated, applicants receive other benefits from the program as well.

When Mirtha Lopez Ficher, a psychiatrist in her native Argentina, immigrated to Winnipeg with her husband and two sons, she had to write a series of exams in order to qualify to practice medicine in Canada. The exam fees were costly and an added and unexpected expense at an already financially demanding time.

Lopez Ficher applied for a loan from TAHHI to help her with the exam fees and was relieved and grateful when she received it. For her, though, the innovative program was about more than just the money.

"The loan was for an exam that was part of the process to get my medical license," she explains. "But the program is not only useful in terms of cold money."

"The loan meant that my family and I did not feel alone at the time," she adds. "We felt the community surrounding us and giving us a helping hand – like the name of the program."

That sentiment, Garfield says, is repeatedly expressed by loan recipients.

"The most important thing that I constantly hear back from clients is they feel that the Jewish community is there to support them," she says. "They truly appreciate the financial support but it is so much more. They feel that they are not alone."

"TAHHI helps people help themselves," Garfield emphasizes. "We are giving individuals an opportunity to get back on their feet and help them move forward at a time when they are faced with financial difficulties and challenges."

Many loan recipients become successful and contributing members of the community, she adds. In fact, several of them have, in turn, acted as guarantors for other applicants seeking a hand up from TAHHI.

That fact alone proves the success of The Asper Helping Hand Initiative.



Izzy Asper z"l established the free loan program in 2003.