

Jewish Advocate

Executive Director of Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Justice Sheila Decter has always been on the forefront of the LGBT rights movement

A progressive advocacy organization, the Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Action is committed to defending civil rights and constitutional liberties and to the pursuit of social and economic justice.

With antecedent roots in the American Jewish Congress, JALSA, as the Boston-based group is more commonly known, has championed gay civil rights and anti-discrimination for decades, dating back to the 1980s when the organization signed onto a US Supreme Court friend-of-the-court brief challenging anti-sodomy laws.

One reason—and in no small measure—for JALSA's vanguard role in gay rights is the organization's executive director Sheila Decter whose personal and professional commitment to LGBT equality began within the Jewish community.

During a recent interview, Decter remembered a seminar she attended for Jewish communal professionals where she and others first advocated gay inclusion.

"It's hard to believe how much things have changed," she said, recalling an early 1980's gathering in Minneapolis, where "the subject was convincing people that it is was entirely appropriate to have [openly] gay men at camps and schools run by the Jewish community," she said, adding, "Just to think that needed to be said then."

Decter's commitment to justice has always embraced a broad range of social and economic issues. She pioneered JALSA's efforts in organizing a coalition-based social service

program, providing hot meals for people living with HIV/AIDS.

"We're an advocacy group," Decter said. "What did we know about planning a social service delivery project?"

But Decter and JALSA know how to mobilize groups and marshal resources. For three years the 70-member coalition worked out of the organization's downtown offices. What began providing 30 meals a week has mushroomed into Community Servings, national model delivering 3,340 meals weekly to people with any number of life-threatening illnesses, including breast cancer.

Besides hot meals, people living with long-term illnesses sometimes need affordable housing. Early on in the AIDS epidemic, JALSA pressed its organizational muscle on the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, which initially claimed that HIV/AIDS was not a long-term disability. Decter enlisted Congressman Barney Frank who helped clear the way for AIDS groups to apply for special handicapped assistance in housing.

For years, Decter and JALSA advocated passage of and lobbied Beacon Hill for the 1989 Gay & Lesbian Civil Rights Law, making Massachusetts the second state to adopt statewide legislation banning discrimination in employment, public accommodations, housing, and insurance.

JALSA supports current legislation to add "gender identity" and "gender expression" to the commonwealth's non-discrimination and hate crimes laws. The organization testified on Beacon Hill for the recently enacted anti-bullying legislation.

Decter ensured that JALSA was an early proponent of marriage equality, signing onto a friend of the court brief in Goodridge.

And JALSA joined with two other non-gay community allied groups in forming the initial steering committee of *MassEquality.org*, established originally in the early 2000s to



fight a proposed anti-gay marriage ballot measure.

"We brought to the table a lot about coalitions," Decter said, referring to JALSA's contribution to the marriage equality organizing. "We had experience putting together winning coalitions for ballot measures."

In effect, JALSA served as the lynchpin for the Massachusetts Jewish community to advocate for equality, individually and collectively through local synagogue social justice groups, with lawmakers.

Along the road to marriage equality, JALSA played a critical role when in December of 2006, same-sex marriage detractors insinuated that lawmakers who were lawyers by profession, risked losing their licenses to practice law if they did not convene and vote in constitutional convention on a citizen's initiative petition before the state legislature defining marriage as the union of a man and woman.

"It was the stupidest threat," said Decter who mobilized members of the state bar board of overseers to refute the charge—over the Christmas holiday no less.

Born in New York City, Decter grew up in New Haven, Connecticut. She holds a bachelor's degree from the former Milwaukee-Downer College and a master's degree in political science from the University of Wisconsin.

It was early on, around the Decter family dining room table where the seeds of advocacy were first planted during lively conversations over union organizing and the "best way to bring about social change," she said.

The message was clear, Decter added, "You were to work for a more just society. You can't just sit around and wait for it to happen. Just do it. Make change yourself." [x]

Editor's note: Chuck Colbert serves on the board of the Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Action (JALSA) and its communications committee.