

LINDSEY SPINDLE

The Outsider Advantage

Fighting the world's oldest hate with Jewish philanthropy's newest players



IN 1998, public health officials in Florida found themselves rapidly losing ground in their battle against a resurgent foe: teenage smoking. Standard approaches—namely, preaching health facts and finger-wagging—were failing terribly, with teenage cigarette use spiking during the decade. The cost of that failure was clear and painful: preventable sickness and death.

Florida needed to shake things up. Looking for a fresh approach, the state reached out to advertising agencies and my team at the PR agency Porter Novelli to tackle the seemingly impossible: Create a campaign that prevents teenage smoking. Given the scale of the problem, our chances of succeeding seemed bleak.

Our first step was to talk with Florida teens from many backgrounds to understand the problem. What emerged was one great truth: Teens love to question authority. Could we redirect that need to challenge authority away from *parents* and toward the *tobacco industry* and its marketing juggernaut? We put teens into the creative driver's seat and handed them the keys. They helped us create *truth*, the campaign against teen smoking.

Success came quickly. By 2000, *truth* had driven a sharp, double-digit decline in youth smoking in Florida. It was adopted by the newly formed anti-youth-smoking American Legacy Foundation and scaled nationally. Very few people who viewed the now-famous “Body Bags” ad have forgotten it.

Nationally, teenage smoking plummeted from 28 percent in 2000 to less than 2 percent in 2025. *Ad Age* named *truth* one of the 10 most effective advertising campaigns of the 21st century, crediting it for preventing hundreds of thousands of Americans a year from smoking and redrawing the field of social marketing.

Visibly led by outsiders—teens and creatives instead of credentialed public health practitioners—*truth* proved to be a lifesaving, society-changing effort. It demonstrated that smoking, once ingrained as a rite of passage, but now stigmatized as a force of destruction, could, against all odds, be pushed out of American teenage life. We tackled a seemingly insurmountable problem using new thinking from unlikely sources, and we reshaped American culture.

The mechanism behind that reshaping was influence: the kind that flows from unexpected voices, fresh perspectives, and the willingness to try something new.



In the middle of our biggest battle in generations, what can Amer-

ican Jews learn from *truth*? Four core insights from the *truth* campaign can help Jews chart a more secure future. Each points toward the critical need for new players, innovative ideas, and an entrepreneurial, action-over-perfection mentality:

1. Nothing in society is inevitable, even when it feels irreversible.
2. Nearly any problem can be solved with the right combination of creativity, capital, and will.
3. Social change is generational work and is never achieved alone.
4. Outsiders are often the key ingredient to upend stalemates and the status quo.

These guideposts now animate my life as one of the least likely people to have made the battle against Jew-hate a central focus of their late-stage career. By sharing the story of my unexpected, sometimes uneasy immersion into combatting antisemitism over the past two-plus years, I want to offer a model for philanthropic influence that other funders and leaders who care about building a thriving Jewish life can emulate—particularly if, like me, they have not spent their careers immersed in Jewish communal structures.



I live in a surfer town in Orange County, California, hardly a center for Jewish life. My expertise is in philanthropic strategy, communications, and brand development. Although I've associated with my Jewish faith my entire life, and observed Jewish holidays with family and friends, I haven't had many professional interactions with the organized Jewish world until recently. I'm a product of boarding school, not Jewish day school. I married an Asian-American Catholic. Most of my colleagues are not Jewish. My

philanthropic leadership has been in “secular philanthropy”—a phrase I didn’t even know existed until I attended my first Jewish Funders Network conference earlier this year. Yet it’s precisely my “outsider/insider” perspective that I believe is advantageous in addressing Jew-hate, a thorny, perennial issue that has consumed countless amounts of communal dollars, energy, and heartache.

October 7 changed everything. The ensuing, painful revelation of antisemitism’s deep, broad, violent, and entrenched presence in America influenced me and the philanthropists I work for, Henry and Susan Samueli, in ways we could not have anticipated.

The Samueli Foundation, which I run, was already six months deep into a critical review of our investments when October 7 happened. What followed was a *truth*-like epiphany: We needed a bold, no-regrets, strategic redirection of our Jewish portfolio. Instead of allocating our funding broadly across a set of established, traditional Jewish organizations (like you’d spread peanut butter over a slice of bread), we could leverage the philanthropic experience we had developed in other areas to address the complicated issue of reducing anti-Jewish hatred. We needed a new approach designed to incentivize audacious ideas and bring transformative capital together quickly in service of those ideas, conveying a can-do, results-oriented spirit that would attract other newcomers to the field.

Speed and teamwork were nonnegotiable. We could not do this gradually or alone.

It turned out that my longtime friend Fay Twersky and her boss, philanthropist Arthur Blank, were thinking similarly. Fay is a national expert in effective strategic philanthropy, with decades of executive experience in complex issues. We had not worked together before, but we had had similar experiences with bold philanthropic initiatives in various areas of American life. We joined forces and immediately brought in a third critical partner who also had experience with

transformative philanthropy: William Foster, CEO of the Bridgespan Group, a global consulting firm for the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. Although we each have varying degrees of personal engagement with Jewish life, none of us were steeped professionally in the American Jewish philanthropic sector. This, we hoped, might be our superpower—the source of a unique sort of influence over the field and one another.

Our initial convening was at a retreat center in the rugged hills above a stretch of the Yellowstone River in Montana, an ideal setting to begin imagining something new.

We used a proven playbook for rapidly and effectively unleashing creative thinking and mobilizing capital at the scale of the challenge: my and William's experience helping to build the Audacious Project, alongside Bridgespan and TED—a collaborative funding initiative tackling the world's most urgent challenges, which has catalyzed \$7 billion in giving since 2017.

The Samuelis gave me the gift of trust, ample resources, and runway to lead without fear, lending their personal engagement at pivotal moments. The Bridgespan team brought world-class analytic research capabilities, scalable and mission-aligned manpower, and deep expertise on big-bet philanthropy. William's personal involvement sent a powerful signal to his firm about the importance of the cause.

We put a premium on recruiting visionary partners to join us, throwing ourselves out there in search of those willing to take a risk with us. It forced each of us into an energizing but uncomfortable zone of speed dating and rapid decision-making. We intentionally looked for other non-usual suspects—funders with deep experience in innovative American philanthropic efforts who were only newly energized about the issue of combatting antisemitism and investing in Jewish thriving. We knew there were a lot of us out there—philanthropists

and professionals who watched with shock and horror the events of October 7 and all that has followed. New donors bring value to the work well beyond their capital: unique capabilities, connections, and critiques, all of which sharpen our effort and extend our influence.

With a group of brave first-movers, we quietly launched the Har Initiative, a new philanthropic collaborative, mobilizing nearly \$75 million from 11 donor entities in our first year of work. Har, the Hebrew word for “mountain,” was inspired by the big-sky thinking of Montana where we first met and by the steep climb we would be on together.

Our orientation focuses on building rather than fighting, since others had already stepped into that lane. After learning with several experts at that first gathering, we understood that to meet such a complex moment, we would need to experiment in several areas all at once. We selected six pathways that are ripe for innovative investment: safety in institutions; healthy discourse on Israel; social media; strategic alliances; democracy and polarization; and thriving Jewish life.

We had confidence in our approach and zero assurances that it would work. But we all believe that philanthropy at its best and purest form is risk capital. The role that foundations can play in the ecosystem of social change is to take big bets that other players cannot take.

In our first year, we made multiyear grants to 15 organizations and leaders with bold five-year plans for safer and stronger Jewish life. Our grantees range from major Jewish institutions, such as Hillel International and Repair the World, which gave us ideas for critical new projects or scaling effective interventions they were struggling to fund, to social entrepreneurs starting new enterprises from scratch. Nu Reads—a subscription book service created by author Tova Mirvis and housed at the Jewish Book Council—addresses emerging waves of Jewish-author blacklisting by driving substantial purchasing of Jewish-authored fiction.

We've also identified organizations fully outside the Jewish community that have a role to play in this society-wide project. PERIL, for example, focuses on using public health approaches to prevent online radicalization, recognizing that antisemitism is often a gateway drug to violent extremism, while Interfaith America's work on college campuses can strengthen the pluralistic fabric of our diverse country. And the important work of small nonprofits such as Project Shema, which addresses antisemitism in progressive organizations, could do with support for scaling up.

For many of our grantees, the investment from Har donors was the largest in their organizational history. Significant financial capital is, of course, its own form of influence—the kind that changes what an organization can attempt. Our nonprofit partners gave our process a perfect net promoter score, virtually unheard-of in measurement and evaluation, recognizing the depth of strategic planning support offered by Bridgespan, the generosity and flexibility expressed by the donors, and the community that encircled them with nonfinancial support. Nearly all the organizations are already meeting or exceeding targets they laid out in their proposals.

In our second year of climbing, we added additional funding partners (including Maimonides Fund, the publisher of SAPIR). Har's donors have committed roughly \$120 million for this second round. Our partners bring differing ideological orientations—center-Right to center-Left, more religiously affiliated to completely secular—and expansive professional backgrounds and philanthropic portfolios. Some are professionally staffed foundations; some are not. Some have a history of giving in the Jewish world, but most do not.

This diversity, too, is an asset: The conversations among our funding partners are deep and fascinating, provocative and challenging, and we know our grantmaking will be richer because of it. Especially when we're dealing with complex issues for which there are no sim-

ple solutions, funders must also influence one another—bringing our extensive and diverse range of experiences to bear as we bounce multiple viewpoints, theories, and strategies off one another. The distinctiveness of what we are building together comes, in no small part, from that mutual shaping.

Our donors also have a great deal in common: We share a sense of urgency, possibility, and curiosity. We believe that to fight, you must build; that territorialism must shrink in service of building trust; that none of us has all the answers, but that this mustn't prevent us from trying; and that you can and should have fun in the pursuit of difficult work—to tighten our bonds for the inevitable steep switchbacks that will come.

Two short years, three unlikely outsiders, more than a dozen donors, 20-plus social innovators, and nearly \$200 million later, we have built a test bed for incentivizing innovation in service of a safer, thriving, enduring Jewish world. By harnessing significant capital, embracing new mindsets, and creating a uniquely diverse philanthropic collaborative, we are demonstrating that influence in this field need not flow only from the longest-tenured, most credentialed insiders. Sometimes it flows most powerfully from people who arrived late, came from elsewhere, and had the *chutzpah*—and the deeply felt passion—to try anyway.



In April 2020, with the world in an economic freefall, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said, “None of us has the luxury of choosing our challenges; fate and history provide them for us. Our job is to meet the tests we are presented.”

The challenge of reducing antisemitism chose me. It is the hardest thing I've done professionally since *truth*. It is also, by far, the

fullest expression of Jewish identity I could have ever imagined. As much as I feel that I, the Samueli Foundation, and the Har Initiative partners are influencing the field through our grantmaking, living in this time of deep challenge to the Jewish people is also profoundly influencing us.

The quest for a safer, thriving Jewish life is a cause that's worth fighting for, no matter the cost. It's worth pushing through the feelings of discomfort from being new to the game. It's worth the risk of losing money, time, even friends and social standing. And it's worth devoting expertise gained elsewhere to this cause. Education, finance, law, business, media, technology, governance, psychology, democracy—all of these areas have a role to play in addressing this exceptionally complex challenge.

On the other side of these risks are assured rewards: wonderful new friendships, a renewed sense of purpose, faith-driven connection, the emotional high that comes with building new things, and a decent shot at making a substantial dent in the world's oldest hate. None of us chose this moment, but we can choose, together, what to make of it. *

LINDSEY SPINDLE serves as president of the Samueli Family Philanthropies, presiding over the Samueli Foundation, the Anaheim Ducks Foundation, and other philanthropic organizations, including the newly formed Har Initiative.