

Unlikely

A FEW GOOD MEN

Superheroes



GET TO KNOW THE FOUNDERS OF CHICAGO JEWISH ALLIANCE

By Ina Bochian

Photo Credits: Ina Bochian

Stumbling up the stairs of the Bucktown Chabad two Hanukkahs ago, I didn't know I'd meet the first Jewish Avenger. Not too long after, just as I was about to get into a verbal altercation with a socially inept disrespectful woman at a Jewish United Fund event, the second Avenger tapped me on the shoulder to introduce himself. The third Avenger, I met in the hallway of the Hyatt Convention Center right before the Illinois Holocaust Museum Humanitarian Awards Dinner, to which I was invited to by the Second Avenger. These three Superheroes are the co-founders of [Chicago Jewish Alliance](#), Natan Ostro, [Danny Schwartz](#), and [Josh Weiner](#).



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These men have represented true leadership and friendship over the past year and a half by giving me a voice, a platform to market my art at events for the nonprofit they founded. Without them, some of the art I created would not exist, but they have served as pillars to the Jewish community and beacons of light. Having met the first Avenger on the last night of Hanukkah and lighting candles together now serves as a reminder of the light we can carry by enabling each other to tap into our strengths. Gifted in different ways, we have been granted gifts that keep on giving and fires that never cease to illuminate the way for other Jews and allies.

Daniel Schwartz spearheaded the nonprofit after a few “courageous Jewish individuals” consisting of Danny, Natan, Derek, Melanie, and myself, ventured off to Chicago’s City Hall on January 31st to show our support for the hostages kidnapped and tortured by Hamas in Gaza, demand their return home, while also supporting the existence of the only Jewish state in the Middle East. With a missing avenger (Josh) who was home sick, it was the five of us surrounded on all sides by furious protestors, yelling racial slurs, calling the grandson of a Holocaust Survivor, Danny, along with the rest of us, Nazis, simply for standing there with the Israeli flag.



Avenger One & Avenger Two at City Hall 1.31.24

Photo Credit: Ina Bochian

None of us were demanding the annihilation of anyone’s indigenous homeland or any other country, nor did we have a vote in the Knesset to decide anything related to what military actions would be taken, and some of us held different opinions politically, but we all agreed on two things: 1. The State of Israel has a right to exist as the only democracy in the Middle East and the sole Jewish state in the world, serving as a home that is inclusive of all races, cultures, ethnicities, religions, and sexual orientations. 2. No ceasefire deal can be reached without the safe return of all hostages kidnapped and tortured by Hamas.

"I want the war to be over too," Danny said to a furious man insisting Danny's name was David just because he was Jewish. "I pray for everyone every night along with the people hurt and dying on the other side. I pray for Palestinians to also have peace, but for this whole thing to be over, Hamas has to return those kidnapped to their families. What is wrong with wanting that?" When the agitator did not have an adequate response he resorted to name calling and later turned to me to ask me why I support Danny and why I care. As far as I was concerned, the hatred ran so deep, an alternative solution to how this conflict could be resolved did not seem to exist for the other side. They screamed, "from the River to the Sea Palestine should be free," and "resistance at any cost," to justify any torture or violence done to civilians, women, and children. None of it made sense.

Imagine a scenario in which unhinged terrorists from Canada crossed the border into the United States during Lollapalooza in Chicago. Suppose these lawless individuals massacred over 1,500 young people, DJs, and artists, while also breaking into homes, shooting families, and committing horrific acts of violence, including kidnappings and torture. How long do you think the United States would tolerate such an outbreak of terror? A month? Two? Meanwhile, by the time we attended City Hall on January 31, Hamas had been holding hostages for 116 days.



Photo Credit: Derek

Next, imagine protests in Marseille, France, where demonstrators demand that the United States adopt military strategies suggested by the citizens. Among a crowd of over 1,000 protesters, envision five Americans standing with an American flag in support of the hostages they want returned, facing harassment and persecution from the crowd. In this situation, if you were one of the few Americans in France and your family members or friends were among those affected by the Lollapalooza attack or taken hostage, would you cave to the pressure or stand your ground? Additionally, do you believe the United States would heed the demands of the Marseille mob, especially given the city's reputation for organized crime and drug trafficking? Definitely not.

Not only did Danny, Natan, and Josh, create opportunities for myself and others to find meaningful connections through activism and community collaborations, but these men became blueprints for how men ought to be men. In the past year or so, I may have had a misunderstanding or two with Natan and Danny, but both have had so much respect for me, just as I have for them. We find ways to treat each other with grace and compassion because we have come to learn our hearts are in the right place.

Danny and Natan, whom I have gotten to know more personally, are truly exceptional men with quality characters who have helped me raise the bar for how I expect men to behave in general. Natan and I had two disagreements since we met and on both occasions he apologized almost immediately. Furthermore, we both became better people as we used each other as a sounding board, even when it was uncomfortable. Iron sharpens iron and Natan might as well be built of steel. Like steel, he is durable and withstands force, but also malleable, allowing him to be humble enough to be shaped into the kind of man who shows up when called upon.

Danny, on the other hand, has had so much grace with me in situations where I may have misspoken or behaved less than ideal. He took the time to talk to me and express his concerns, while still having patience with me to be the best version of myself. The way Danny handles things with people sets off a chain reaction and calls for introspection.



Photo Credit: Ina Bochian

Those who can self regulate their emotions ultimately benefit from Danny's leadership because they can adapt the skills required to adjust to any environment. For me, this particular founder has been an example of how to navigate between personal and business matters through leveraging stoicism. He also encourages me to lean on my skillset and using my creative talents wherever I can.

When CJA first started, I helped design the initial logo, which I later painted as a gift for Danny's birthday. Reminiscing about our day at City Hall, I painted a lion for Natan because his middle name, Ariel, means "Lion of G'd" and also because the core group is collectively a pack of lions. Without even telling me, Danny used my artwork in a backdrop for a press interview featuring Max Long and Michael Kaminsky, which aired on ABC News, NBC News, and FOX News. Along with the reposts this interview got on social media, it means the world to me that Danny is so thoughtful about creating opportunities for my work to get the maximum exposure.

As I became more invested in my art, it was Natan who encouraged me to bring my paintings to a rally we organized at DePaul. Little does he know that I almost didn't finish the initial piece that started a whole series of paintings dedicated to the hostages. I vividly remember our phone call as I was pacing back and forth on a walk in front of the Holocaust museum with my little "adoptive" dog belonging to an elderly doctor and lawyer, who shared Danny's last name, Dr. Schwartz. At the time, I was not sure if Danny was upset with me or not, but Natan said, "Just come to the rally, bring your art. You're a part of this community."



Photo Credit: Ina Bochian



While driving Natan up the wall with my ideas, I went on to paint an entire collection, feeling completely supported. More often than I can count, Natan held my hand just as I was about to roll down the stairs both literally and figuratively. At one point, we also designed a shirt together, which he wears to represent CJA and also support my merch and art. For a finance guy, Natan might as well be an art agent or my personal PR because I have had more referrals from him than anyone else. Whoever Natan sends my way ends up being a repeat customer and happy to support my business. “I don’t wear this to show appreciation, but because it is great quality and people like it,” he told me. “You do great work.”

Additionally, Danny finds ways to include me in environments where I can network effectively, participating in community fairs and projects. Over the past two years, he has invited me to the Holocaust Museum Humanitarian Awards, which have been more memorable than I can express. Furthermore, Danny, alongside the other board members, has created opportunities for me to sell my artwork at their book fairs, particularly when my only income came from freelance work. Even after donating a percentage of my sales, the art sales helped cover my expenses for a month and allowed me to reinvest some of the profits into creating more art.

Thanks to CJA and the support of these extraordinary founders, the past year has allowed me to create meaningful art for the Jewish community and its allies. Seeing clients at events wearing my Magen David and Yellow Ribbon T-shirts or my little Ariel the Jewish Bear merch reminds me of how bold I felt just before creating those pieces. Reflecting on the conversations, group chats, and late-night texts during times when I felt barely hanging on, I am deeply fortunate to have these men in my life and to be engaged in this important work together.

Being around these men and the rest of the organization makes me think of my dad, who often worries about me. He is my first superhero and can rest assured that I'm being looked after by true gentlemen who lead by example like he has my whole life. Beyond activism, networking, and making art, the men of CJA can give a master cast to other men on platforming and supporting women. While I can't speak for anyone else, Danny and Natan, have certainly raised the bar for the kind of behavior I am now accustomed to. So many things go unsaid. With them, I never have to ask for things I struggle to imply with others. After feeling so out of place for so long, I finally feel seen and accepted. Among this group, I've carved out my little place where I can be unapologetically myself, though we all experienced some growing pains.



Photo Credit: John Goodman

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Despite any ups and downs, what makes these founders special is their dedication to consistently improving themselves, accepting suggestions, and gently giving advice when course correction is necessary. CJA is more than a nonprofit organization developed to fight antisemitism. It is an organization that helps individuals overcome self limiting beliefs that may lead to self hatred and isolation if not addressed. After all, the danger the Jewish community faces today comes from those self hating Jews who have yet to find the love for their Jewish soul, their neshama.

Baruch HaShem, he sent me Danny, Natan, and Josh, as strong leaders who are the kind of men we need so that I can be soft, emotional, and feminine, while still feeling supported. The most masculine thing a man can do is to create an environment where a woman doesn't feel like she needs to be both a woman and a man. To do so, the first step is showing up and following through, and the second is nurturing an encouraging environment through words of affirmation. Without this, we can feel lost and lose the confidence to show up for ourselves or others.



Photo Credit: Suki Lee

One day recently, I told my best friend that no one would care if I get kidnapped or something happens to me. It was one of those off the cuff comments, but immediately he responded, "Nahh. First, I got you. Then, your boy Danny would host a press conference and Natan would probably go looking for you." Laughing, I agreed with him.

Later, I found myself thinking how these friendships have strengthened my belief in the goodness of a few good men. After having attended lectures and documentary screenings featuring women who survived brutal assaults at the hands of barbaric men on and after October 7th, experiencing the nurturing qualities of men who are comfortable enough to be sensitive has been a gift.

From its inception, CJA has championed the art of showing up, being present, and organizing events that served a dual purpose: to educate and mobilize the Jewish community along with allies to take a stand against Jewish Hate of any kind. This organization is not just for Jews, but rather for any ally who wants to keep an open mind and educate themselves on how unsafe the Jewish people have been feeling lately.

With celebrities like Ye West (formerly Kanye) posting, “This next album got that antiemetic sound. My next sound antisemitic,” and millions of people agreeing with him, regurgitating hate, we need more voices to be raised on our behalf. This is not 1930.



Photo Credit: Ina Bochian

We are not sacred. Danny's grandfather survived the Holocaust so that his grandson can take the torch and pass it on to those who are ready to fight back. While Danny, Natan, and Josh, are doing more than just their part, where are the rest of the Jewish men in this generation? Maybe you're shy, but if you need someone to shadow, CJA can definitely use more volunteers. Rise up. This is your time to shine Yehudim.