

## JCRC finds that success is Sweder

By Michael Gelbwasser  
Advocate Staff

Kenneth Sweder is tenacity personified.

When the Lexington resident isn't fighting for his clients at a local law firm, he fights for civil rights as — among other things — the top lay leader of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston (JCRC).

Sweder recently finished the first year of a three-year term as the JCRC's president. Before that, he was JCRC's treasurer, served 15 years on its executive committee and once chaired its Soviet Jewry Committee.

As president, Sweder has a "daily role" with JCRC. Together with the paid professional staff and other leaders, he works to establish and realize JCRC's vision.

Sweder says in recent years JCRC has intensified its drive to achieve social justice in local inner cities as well as in Jewish communities across the world. JCRC will likely will intensify its efforts in this direction, he added.

"The programs we're creating are ones in which Jewish learning and social justice are as they should be: inextricably intertwined," exclaims Sweder, 52, chairman of the Litigation department of the Boston office of Stroock, Stroock & Lavan. "People feel as if they are praying with their feet when they are marching for a cause."

Sweder himself has marched alongside activists throughout his life. In 1968, the Queens, N.Y., native campaigned for New Party presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy and was editor of the New York University Law School's Law Review. He then served two years as assistant to the president at Brandeis University.

Sweder left Brandeis to become special counsel to Bess Myerson, the first Jewish Miss America

who was then New York City's commissioner of consumer affairs. But he and his wife, Gerri, returned to Boston in 1971 after realizing "how much we loved Boston and the environs." Sweder became a practicing business litigator and trial lawyer and active in social causes facing the Greater Boston community.

"I've become engaged by the texts and traditions of Jewry," he says, "and I've come to an understanding that this is [just] one aspect of Jewish spiritual life. Judaism is a worldly religion, and Jews don't usually seek their spiritual lives by cloistering themselves apart from the world. They act within a world according to what they believe are the diverse concerns."

Locally, Sweder has worked primarily with the JCRC and the American Jewish Congress. In the mid-1970s, as a member of the AJCongress' Commission of Law and Social Action (CLSA), which broke much legislative ground in the civil rights sphere, Sweder contributed to bills that preventing companies from complying with the Arab boycott of Israel. The Massachusetts Legislature eventually passed this legislation, which was the catalyst and model for federal laws. The project was Sweder's "first significant work with the American Jewish Congress."

Later, Sweder served as the AJCongress' national vice president and New England Region president from 1982-88. Before this, he was, simultaneously, CLSA chairman and chairman of JCRC's Soviet Jewry Committee during the 1980s.

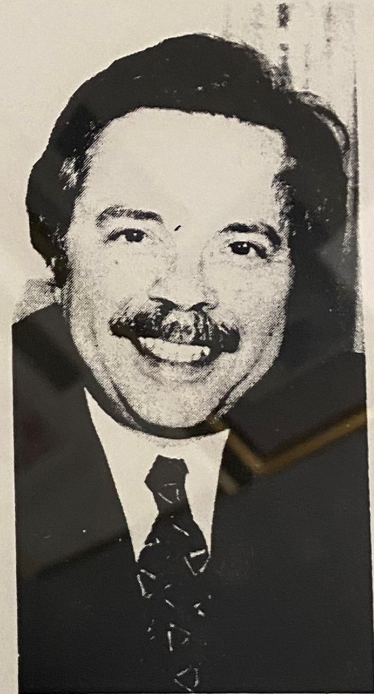
Sweder had helped in the establishment of the Soviet Jewry Legal Advocacy Center, which "filed briefs on behalf of prisoners of conscience based on the Soviet law" in 1978. The center's functions included trying "to bring to the public's attention that the So-

viet Union was ignoring and flouting its own laws in its treatment of Jewish prisoners of conscience, refuseniks."

Sweder calls Boston's sister-city relationship with Dnepetrovsk, a Ukrainian city with about 70,000 Jews, "an excellent example of the kind of partnership" that the community "should promote and make use of." The Soviet Jewry Committee is leading Boston's efforts to provide Dnepetrovsk with additional food, medical supplies, Judaica and other essentials.

"We want to help instill within the entire Jewish community [of Greater Boston] a deeper knowledge of Judaism and a real sense of the mission and obligation which we have as a community to seek justice and pursue righteousness. We must help provide genuine gateways for various segments and individuals to fulfill that mission and be a part of the Jewish community," Sweder emphasizes. Raised in a Conservative household, Sweder and his family now belong to Temple Isaiah in Lexington, a Reform temple. He and his wife have been married for over 27 years and have two children, Justin, who recently graduated from Yale University, and Rebecca, who recently finished her first year at the University of Michigan.

"After over 25 years," Sweder says, "I still love the process of analytical thinking as well as legal advocacy. I'm very happy to be still practicing as a vigorous advocate for my clients and to help in trying to untangle complex business matters."



Kenneth Sweder