

The Memorial Legacy Plaque Project: An Innovative Act of Marking Memory

By Doris Francis, Ph.D.

Jewish tradition teaches us to remember, not to forget. The memorial legacy plaque project, an innovative community program introduced at

Santa Fe's only dedicated Jewish cemetery, further facilitates this injunction to remember.

The Legacy Plaque Project was originally conceived as a fund-raiser to support the expansion of the

beautiful stone Gould memorial wall bordering the Santa Fe Jewish cemetery, which is a dedicated section within Rivera Memorial Gardens. Jane Hochberg and Rabbi Berel Levortov of the Santa Fe Jewish Center –Chabad – both suggested the sale of memorial plaques to help finance this construction, while Rabbi Malka Drucker, then Rabbi of HaMakom, added the Jewish custom of bimkom kever which means “in place of the grave.”

Through an evolving interpretation of this tradition, relatives and friends who are not buried in Santa Fe can be remembered in the Santa Fe cemetery by memorializing their names on plaques mounted on the



Santa Fe Jewish Cemetery Walls Covered with Legacy Memorial Plaques, Rivera Memorial Gardens. Photo by Jeff Caven

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cemetery walls. In mobile American society, many people live in places different from where family members are buried. The conception of the legacy plaque project as a *bimkom kever*, “in place of the grave,” allows visitors to recall loved ones in their own Jewish cemetery section in Santa Fe without travelling thousands of miles to visit other burial grounds.

The cemetery committee of the Jewish Community Council of Northern New Mexico transformed the rabbis' concepts into physical reality. Together they created the legacy plaque project. These committee members who generously volunteered their time and creative ideas were Doris Francis, cemetery committee chair, Jane Hochberg, cemetery committee treasurer, Richard Martinez, architect of Martinez Architecture Studio PC, Gay Block, photographer, and John Morris, artisan/stonemason of New Mexico Stone.

With input from David Izraelvitz, then chair of the JCCNM board, the design of the Frankfurt Holocaust Memorial Wall became the inspiration. Following the Frankfurt model, but changing the materials, it was agreed to craft the plaques from locally sourced stone that resembles the rich, warm colors of Jerusalem and to make each plaque wide enough to place a stone on top to mark a visit. Wording was limited to the name(s) of the remembered individual(s), a simplification that enhanced the elegance and power of each plaque and made them visible from a distance.

Joy Silver and Atma Wiseman stressed the concept of legacy, thereby transforming each plaque into an archive of ancestral heritage. Jane Hochberg and Jane Buchsbaum incorporated these concepts into promotional materials. The JCCNM board approved the project, the Santa Fe Jewish community was immediately responsive and supportive, and twenty plaques were sold the first year.

Each year, the newly added plaques are unveiled on the Sunday between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and their sponsors are invited to speak about the individuals named. All five Jewish religious leaders representing Santa Fe's varied traditions cooperatively lead this special Remembrance Day service, a symbolic statement of the unity of the Santa Fe Jewish community.

This year the Remembrance Day event will be held on Sunday, September 12 at 1:30 pm in the Jewish section at Memorial Gardens Cemetery. All are welcome.

While many people report that they originally purchased plaques to support the cemetery, they also note that the private and collective meanings of the plaques have grown in importance over time, becoming part of an innovative ritual of memory. People report that these plaques bring named family members physically and spiritually closer, becoming a vehicle of connection, comfort, guidance, and reflection as they shape their legacies as transmitters of family and community values. The plaques make concrete the names and meaning of these ancestors as contributing members of the community for future generations.

People leave a stone when they visit, making a material and spiritual connection through the generations. These acts of placing a stone and touching the plaque are embodied acts of memory that become, over time, part of the routine of remembrance and the intergenerational transmission of heritage.

The cemetery walls powerfully assert the continuation of Jewish communities into future generations against the destruction of the Holocaust. They signify to other ethnic groups sharing the cemetery that Jewish people honor, respect, and remember their community ancestors.

For further information about the legacy memorial plaque project, please contact: jccnm.org/Jewish-cemetery or Doris Francis at remembranceplaques@q.com.

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