

Heroes Among Us: Our Non-Jewish Family Members

By Rabbi Michael Lotker

There are many people in the Temple Ner Ami family that I admire. The founding families who went out on a limb, personally and financially to begin this new and wonderful enterprise, once and for all answering in the affirmative the question; “Are there really Jews in Camarillo?” I admire the members of the Board and the usual gang of volunteers (you know who you are) who show up time and time again to do the work of the Temple without complaining and often without being asked. And then there is, of course, our own wonderful Katie Glenn, who goes so far beyond the call of her specific duties to serve us that I often feel like a veritable sluggard by comparison.

But I would like to focus here on thanking our non-Jewish family members. These are the spouses, married to Jews, who have agreed to raise their children Jewishly and to have a Jewish home. These are the folks who drive car pool, who cajole their not always enthusiastic children into trekking off to Torah School, who bring the snacks and read the flyers. These are the folks who often wind up downplaying or even sacrificing their own religious traditions to serve ours. Sometimes these include non-Jews, divorced from their Jewish spouses, re-married to non-Jews, who continue to raise their children as Jews.

I am in awe of you. You have my admiration. You have my thanks. Temple Ner Ami and the Jewish community is in debt to you.

As you know, Judaism does not seek converts. Traditionally, a rabbi is supposed to discourage a convert three times before accepting them to study. While Reform Judaism is more welcoming than this, we don't insist that everyone convert to Judaism. As I was taught “Judaism is the one true path – FOR JEWS!” I believe that other religions are valid paths to God alongside Judaism and have the utmost respect for them.

But I also want to offer an invitation to our non-Jewish family to study with us, pray with us, and, if the spirit moves you, convert and join us. I don't want you to take our silence as rejection or disinterest. Please understand that while we do not intend to pressure you, even in the slightest way, we do welcome you and would be delighted if you would consider joining us. For further information about study or conversion, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Our ancestors, even those of a few generations ago, would not believe the state of the Jewish family today. Yes, they would mourn (some would literally mourn) the increasing rates of interfaith marriage among Jews. But I also believe that they would be amazed and delighted by the extent to which our non-Jewish moms and dads have gone to ensure that their children would be Jewish. On my behalf, and on their, *todah rabbah*, many thanks.