

Our Cultural Connection

The Roth Family JCC's cultural arts programs and events are a gift in more ways than one

by Emily Rajj

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Local bookstore owner Lauren Zimmerman has made it her personal mission to ensure The Roth Family JCC has some of the best cultural arts programs in the region.

Before Lauren Zimmerman opened Writer's Block Bookstore in 2014, Winter Park hadn't had a local bookshop for 20 years. But Lauren's passion for the arts and bringing people together propelled her to expand cultural offerings for the community well beyond her own store shelves.

"Cultural arts – whether it's literature, whether it's art, whether it's music, whatever it is – crosses all demographics and all socioeconomic conditions," Lauren says. "Not having cultural arts in a community... there's no way you will ever bring people together."

Four years ago, Lauren set out to create that community connection when she brought the Jewish Book Festival to Central Florida. She had originally called the festival's parent organization, the Jewish Book Council (JBC), to find out more about their national Jewish Book Month in November. It was then she learned about the organization's many festivals around the country, which are typically sponsored by JCCs, Jewish Federations, and synagogues. That particular year, the JBC was also actively seeking bookstores with which to partner.

"So I joined on my own without Jewish organizational affiliation," says Lauren. "I went to the annual conference, where they introduce authors on tour – Jewish authors or Jewish interest books – and organize Jewish book festivals all over the country."

Although none of the Jewish organizations in town partnered with Lauren that year or the next, she set up a meeting with Robby Etzkin, then The Roth Family JCC's executive director, and prepared to give her pitch.

"Robby said, 'Let me stop you right there. We're doing it,'" remembers Lauren. "They were already familiar with the JBC, so they understood the value of the festival. At the end of the day, the job of the JCC is to bring people together. The best place for cultural arts is the JCC."

Lauren believes that so strongly, she has personally helped fund the JCC's cultural arts directors, so they could bring a wider variety of lectures, art exhibitions, and, of course, authors to the JCC.

Our community's own Jewish Book Festival, in particular, has grown each year, and this year was no exception, even with the physical limitations presented by the coronavirus pandemic.

"Something great that happened as a result of the virus is that we partnered with seven other JCCs in South Florida, Atlanta, and Tampa with events," explains Lauren.

This year's festival, which was held virtually and ran October 8 to 25, featured more than 25 events with fiction and nonfiction writers, a Florida author spotlight, and a closing talk with children's author Brad Meltzer and illustrator Christopher Eliopoulos, who collaborated on *I am Anne Frank* and more than 30 other titles in their Ordinary People Change the World series.

Helping others is Lauren's main goal no matter her job – and those jobs have been varied. She worked in interior architecture for 12 years before going to law school and becoming an attorney, focusing on guardianship and dependency. Lauren's desire to repair Florida's broken Department of Children and Families system led to her almost completing a social-work degree while raising three daughters at the same time, but Lauren decided she needed to work in a more uplifting environment. Her bookstore provided just that.

"I need a place where it's wonderful and friendly and people are always happy," says Lauren. "For my whole life, I've done things with purpose. Every job I've ever had has always involved me trying to figure out how to make the world a better place, one person at a time. It's corny, but unless I'm doing something that is helping people or benefiting them, I get bored and restless."