

essay

SAJE In The Sun

Detroiters in Florida reconnect while hearing about city's renewal.

Delray Beach, Fla.

An encouraging discussion about Detroit's emergence as a comeback city, while acknowledging its struggles, provided the backdrop for snowbirds and former residents to mix and mingle in South Florida.

The draw not only was the chance to enjoy refreshments while reconnecting with friends at Seagate Country Club, but also to hear three young professionals active in Detroit's rebirth share their narrative about what's going right in the city

that climbed back from bankruptcy in 2014.

That's not to say Detroit has cleared away such haunting issues as crime, blight, drugs, a staggered industrial core, retail flight, public transit, underfunded schools, a stubborn school-dropout rate and a population decline since the city's heyday.



Robert Sklar
Contributing
Editor

Still, new businesses, investments, jobs and residents are helping steady the course.

More than 200 people attended the Jan. 25 presentation of SAJE in the Sun, a spinoff of the Jewish Community Center of Metropolitan Detroit's long-popular Seminars for Adult Jewish Enrichment (SAJE). All three presenters are *Detroit Jewish News* contributing writers.

UPBEAT ABOUT DETROIT

Presenter Ben Falik is director of Jewish-oriented Repair the World: Detroit and co-founder of the secular Summer in the City, both Detroit nonprofits dedicated to community organizing and service. Young people have flocked to the call of both organizations.

Falik, a tireless champion for why Detroit matters, gave a panoramic perspective on Motor City successes, Jewish and secular — from Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue, Chabad in the D, J-Cycle and Rabbi Dan Horwitz's The Well to Eden Gardens Block Club and Beth El Community Transformation Center.

"For the longest time," he said, "it felt like the premise of conversations about Detroit was, 'Is anything all right?' That was particularly true with people who knew Detroit in its sepia-toned and Kodachrome days of Hudson's, Sander's, Central, Mumford and Dexter and Davison.

"So is anything all right? Yes. Things are



Panelists Robin Schwartz, Adam Finkel and Ben Falik, all Metro Detroit residents

really dynamic. We know Detroit has some extraordinary challenges. They're not new, but cumulative and compounding. But as evidenced by folks in this room, at home in Detroit, in the suburbs and elsewhere, there's optimism — and a sense of goodwill, grit, perseverance and resilience."

Presenter Adam Finkel is a partner at Orfin Ventures, which incubates and funds deep-tech ventures. He's also a member of ROI Networks for global Jewish innovation. He was *the* catalyst for Moishe House, a national grassroots residential and Jewish engagement initiative for young adults, moving into Detroit.

"The Jewish community has had a collaborative approach to building relationships with outside groups, so it's not just people from the suburbs coming in or people from one ethnicity leading the way," the spirited ambassador for all things Detroit said.

"The biggest successes have come when we've seen the Jewish community form early strong partnerships and let our work speak for itself. At the end of the day, we, the Jewish community, succeed by helping others succeed — by advancing *tikkun olam*, repair of the world, and by inspiring more of the Jewish community to be a part of what's happening without necessarily needing to have the headlines in favor of the Jewish community."

Presenter Robin Schwartz is public relations director for Dan Gilbert's Bedrock Real Estate Services. Since 2011, Bedrock and its affiliates have invested more than \$2.2 billion in more than 85 properties in Downtown Detroit. Schwartz told Bedrock's high-octane story and stressed that many different organizations and individuals are working together on Detroit's comeback.



Event co-chairs Cheri Victor and Nancy Finkel

She told the *JN* that Gilbert's business operations and Ilitch Holdings Inc., for example, have been synergistic in their pursuit of rejuvenating Detroit.

"We want others to invest in the city," the former broadcast journalist said. "Detroit's ongoing resurgence requires innovation and collaboration from a variety of stakeholders. We love to see others get involved."

A COLLECTIVE EFFORT

SAJE in the Sun is a joint project of the Detroit JCC, Wayne State University's Cohn-Haddow Center for Judaic Studies and the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit. It is endowed by a generous gift from Detroiters Cis Maisel Kellman.

Pearlena Bodzin of West Bloomfield loved the panelists' passion for the mitzvah of *tikkun olam* and their enthusiasm for "a vibrant, successful Detroit."

"The added bonus of the afternoon," she said, "was seeing friends who are from Detroit and who could relate to the issues of the city."

Irwin Cohen of Oak Park suggested, "Dan Gilbert has fast-forwarded the progress of Detroit by 20 years or more." He urged Detroit business leaders to push for five-hour parking meters so visitors have enough time to shop, dine and otherwise "enjoy the Downtown experience."

Nancy Finkel of Bloomfield Hills and Cheri Victor of Farmington Hills co-chaired SAJE in the Sun 2016.

"SAJE in the Sun is all about connections among Detroiters living in various parts of Florida and between them and the Detroit JCC," Finkel said. "It's a Florida enrichment component on behalf of the JCC." *

See related cover story, page 10.