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'Swonder women

Torch passed at law, social action alliance

By **Brett M. Rhyne** Advocate staff



Sheila Decter and Mike Dukakis

PHOTO: ELLEN SHUB

BOSTON – Superlatives and notables filled Temple Israel of Boston here Sept. 14, when the Jewish Alliance for Law & Social Action held its “Wonder Women of Jewish Social Activism” event honoring Sheila Decter, recently retired as JALSA executive director, and welcoming Cindy Rowe, as the nonprofit organization’s new leader.

“These are two great women,” said former Massachusetts governor and Democratic presidential candidate Michael S. Dukakis, simply, “who have had an enormous influence on my life and others. Sheila, from the time I was a young legislator, and Cindy, who is my party chairman in Brookline.

“I love them, I revere them, and I hope they keep going as long as they possibly can,” he continued, with a chuckle.

Dukakis’ wife, Kitty, accompanied him to the event; in his remarks to the assembled audience, he referred to her, Decter and Rowe as “three great, Jewish women.”

“I think this was a wonderful occasion of thanking a Wonder Woman as we welcome a Wonder Woman,” said state Treasurer Deb Goldberg, another Brookline Democrat. “Who better than Cindy Rowe to step into Sheila Decter’s shoes? Two women who I’ve worked with on social justice issues for more years than I can count.”

Goldberg addressed the 300 attendees, as did Dukakis, Decter, Rowe and two of Decter’s children, Philip Decter and Rachel Decter Hyman. Sending greetings recorded on video were current state Attorney General Maura Healey, U.S. Rep. Joseph Kennedy III (D-Brookline) and Democratic U.S. Senators Edward Markey and Elizabeth Warren; and former officials Barney Frank, Steve Grossman and Deval Patrick.

JALSA president Lawrence Bailis emceed the program and Rabbi Matthew Soffer of Temple Israel gave a blessing.



Some of the glitterati included, from left, Sheila Decter, Rachel Decter Hyman, Deb Goldberg, Kitty and Mike Dukakis, and Marty and Cindy Rowe

PHOTO: ELLEN SHUB



Sheila Decter

“It’s a wonderful turnout,” Rowe commented. “So many people here to honor Sheila’s 40 years of social justice activism, and so many people to welcome me into this new position. It’s really thrilling to see how many people have turned out.”

“It’s an honor to be the next executive director of JALSA,” Rowe added. “I know that there is a lot of work to do in the world, and hopefully, JALSA is the ‘home’ where people will come to act on their progressive values.”

“JALSA’s an incredible organization,” effused Zippy Ostroy, who serves as the group’s treasurer. “My husband and I got connected when we first moved here, and coming from a place that had a very sparse Jewish community [Indiana], coming to a place like Boston and Brookline and connecting to an organization like JALSA, which is so incredibly effective, using the resources it has optimally, forming coalitions – which is the way to really effect change – it’s just been an honor to work with them.”

In addition to Dukakis and Goldberg, other politicians in attendance included state Sen. Cynthia Stone Creem (D-Newton), state Rep. Marjorie Decker (D-Cambridge), and Brookline selectmen Bernard Greene and Heather Hamilton.

"This was a marvelous event celebrating two heroines – two stars –and an amazing organization," cheered state Rep. Ruth Balsler (D-Newton). "JALSA is the best. As a legislator, I can always count on JALSA to be there to support the most important issues, whether it's women's equality, the rights of all minorities or working people.

"These two women are fabulous leaders," she continued. "It's a pleasure to honor them."

"I worked with Sheila for several years," said state Rep. Frank Israel Smizik (D-Brookline), who attended with his wife, Julie Johnson. "She's wonderful. She works very hard. She has incredible dedication.

"I've also worked a little bit with Cindy as the new executive director," he continued. "And I've worked for many years with her before that on many things. She's going to be great. I'm very happy with her new job and very happy for us for what we're getting."

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The Jewish organizational world was well represented at the event, including Lawrence D. Lowenthal, former executive director of the American Jewish Committee New England, and that group's past president, Rick Mann; Nahma Nadich, deputy director of the Jewish Community Relations Council; Suzi Schuller, executive director of Yad Chessed; Barry Shrage, president and CEO of Combined Jewish Philanthropies, the Boston-area Jewish federation; and Robert O. Trestan, regional director of the Anti-Defamation League-New England.

"Sheila was magnificent," gushed Limmud Boston organizer Steffi Aronson Karp, "when she gathered the people of Occupy Boston and brought them to a session of Limmud Boston – bringing the community to the community. It was very important. She was always on top of every issue."

Nor was Rabbi Soffer the only cleric present; Rabbi Barbara Penzner of Temple Hillel B'nai Torah in West Roxbury also attended, among others.

"This is an amazing and wonderful event," raved Rabbi Judith D. Kummer, executive director of the Jewish Chaplaincy Council of Massachusetts.

"Sheila has done a fantastic job," Rabbi Kummer enthused. "A truly phenomenal job representing the Jewish community on these very important issues."

"It's a wonderful event," observed Temple Israel's Rabbi Elaine Zecher. "There are two very strong women who are very professional and have made a great impact on the community at large.

"It's wonderful to be here," she said.



Cindy Rowe, left, Kitty Dukakis and Mike Dukakis

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