



THE BEAUTY IN EVERY CHILD:

UJA-FEDERATION OF NEW YORK EXPLORES THE PEARLS PROJECT OF POSITIVE EXPOSURE

Positive Exposure paired up with the UJA-Federation of New York to launch a community based PEARLS Project in the New York metropolitan area. Thanks to support from the Oppenheimer-Haas Foundation, the project enabled young people living with genetic, physical, cognitive and/or behavioral differences, from 10 UJA-affiliated agencies, to experience a photo shoot and blog about life from their perspective. These blogs were intended to provide peer audiences with a closer look at life with a disability while sparking conversations about the types of similarities and unique differences we all share.

In 1917, the United Jewish Appeal (UJA) Federation of New York was founded by uniting the 3,637 separate agencies that served Jewish individuals living in New York. The UJA works to help individuals in need, inspire Jewish life, strengthen the global Jewish community, and bring together various organizations. The UJA includes over 100 social service, health care and communal organizations, which aid both Jewish and non-Jewish communities. Although they work with a variety of different populations, the UJA is deeply committed to helping individuals living with differences. In fact, over the past decade and a half, the UJA partnered with the J.E. & Z.B. Butler Foundation to establish services for individuals with disabilities and their families to help them live rich and full lives. Aligning with Positive Exposure's mission, the UJA emphasizes the importance of acceptance and inclusion. According to Anita Altman, Deputy Managing Director in the Department of Government and External Affairs, and founder of the UJA's Task Force for People with Disabilities, the UJA's ultimate goal is to "shape and transform societal attitudes towards people with disabilities."

Ms. Altman, one of the co-founders of ReelAbilities: New York Disabilities Film Festival, first read about Positive Exposure in the 2011 New York Times article featuring Positive Exposure and its various projects. It was in this article that Altman learned about the PEARLS project in which individuals with differences blog about their lives using written posts, as well as videos and images. K-12 students read these blogs and then initiate a dialogue about what it is like to live with a difference.

"I recognized that the PEARLS project was so consistent with our vision and what we wanted to achieve in making change," says Altman. After a chance encounter with Rick at a conference in Israel, the pair decided to work together to make the PEARLS project happen. With support from the Oppenheimer-Haas Foundation and the use of the UJA's extensive network of agencies in Northern Westchester and Long Island's Nassau County, as well as the five boroughs of New York, Positive Exposure launched a 10-site PEARLS project as a laboratory exploration. This first stage was an enormous success. "People loved having their pictures taken by Rick," said Altman. "Rick delivered extraordinarily beautiful portraits of these young people." Some of these photos were featured on the blogs, as well as in an exhibit at the UJA Federation's offices. A selection of these images will be included in a Positive Exposure exhibition at the JCC Manhattan on May 9th, 2013, launching the Reel Abilities Film Festival.

The Oppenheimer Haas Foundation awarded Positive Exposure a second grant for 2013 in order to continue this amazing project and the UJA and Positive Exposure are currently getting ready for the exciting next stage. During the second phase, the project will be open to young audiences at select Hebrew schools in Westchester County and Manhattan. According to Chantal Lowe, the Program Associate for the UJA's Task Force for People with Disabilities, this phase will focus on engaging more individuals (PEARLS Ambassadors) in the blogging process while developing and implementing PEARLS Project curricula and materials specific to Hebrew School audiences reading/viewing the blogs, thereby continuing the process of spreading awareness, acceptance and dialogue about difference within our shared humanity.



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