



## Presentation of Jewish Community Action's 2010 Wellstone Call to Justice Award

by Steven Foldes, Ph.D.

*[Dr. Foldes is a board member of Jewish Community Action. This is the text of his speech given at Jewish Community Action's Annual Celebration on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010.]*

I was asked to present this year's Paul and Sheila Wellstone Call to Justice Award to the leadership of VOICE Community Building Initiative because, like the members of VOICE, I am a refugee to this country. My family escaped from Hungary in 1956, during the Hungarian Revolution, when I was seven years old, and we eventually joined a small remnant of my family that survived the Holocaust and then lived in Los Angeles. Even though my family and I were documented immigrants, and many Americans welcomed us as victims of Soviet Communism—remember this was the 50s—living the life of immigrants was very difficult. Like most refugees, we came with nothing but some family photographs sewn into the lining of our overcoats. We could not understand or speak English, and everything, down to the food we ate, was foreign. However, we did come with many stories, stories that defined our past and indelibly influenced our lives in our new country and affected our views of the world.

Generally, our new American neighbors knew little about our previous lives and our stories. Some understood the larger context of war and politics, but few ever learned about the effect of these larger events on our lives. It has been this way too with the Russian-speaking immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who started to come here beginning with the Free Soviet Jewry movement of the 1970s and 80s, and continuing after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Those who arrived as children and younger adults were, like other waves of immigrants before them, able to acculturate to American life. But the older immigrants have had a more difficult time, struggling with the English language, often facing poverty and ill health. Many have been isolated and forgotten. It is this combination of problems that VOICE is designed to address.

The VOICE Community Building Initiative represents a programmatic collaboration between the Sabes Jewish Community Center and Jewish Community Action, with funding by the Minneapolis Jewish Federation. The project's goal is to engage and connect the Russian-speaking Jewish elderly community in the Loring Park neighborhood.

With the current leadership of Lyudmyla Petrenko, VOICE provides programming opportunities for the Russian-speaking populations at Booth Manor, Nicollet Towers and Loring 100 to address the key concern of this group: social isolation from the broader Jewish and general communities. These programs are intended to reduce social isolation, build connections with the broader Jewish and general communities, and help ensure that the stories of Russian Jewish immigrants are shared with others who may learn from them. By allowing Russian-speaking elders to keep both their bodies and their minds active, the programs also help ensure both the physical and mental well-being of a vulnerable population.

Programming over the past two years has included:

- Regular English as a Second Language and Citizenship classes.
- Senior Fitness classes, held on-site at Booth Manor.
- Frequent Jewish holiday and music programming, which builds on a partnership between the Sabes JCC, JCA, and Temple Israel. These programs help reconnect Russian-speaking Jews with their cultural and religious heritage.
- Movie nights, with Russian-language movies and refreshments.
- Day trips and excursions. These have included trips to the State Capitol, the Sabes JCC, and a Lake Minnetonka boat cruise. Such trips help ensure that Russian seniors who are able remain active and involved in the community.

The residents feel that VOICE helps them. By participating in different events, community organizing, and leadership development, they are able to express their communal voice and enrich their lives.

The Wellstone Call to Justice Award is named in honor of Senator Paul Wellstone, a champion of justice and advocate of freedom. Senator Wellstone was a member of Jewish Community Action and valued the work we do. He was tragically taken from us now eight years ago. I can't help but think that he would be amused by this year's recipient being VOICE. As we remember, he was a little guy but had a very big voice, in every sense of that word.

Previous recipients of the Wellstone Call to Justice Award have included leaders in various parts of our community:

- Rabbi Morris Allen of Beth Jacob Congregation and Director of Hekhsher Tzedek.
- Dorothy Bridges, former President of Franklin National Bank.
- Lee Greenfield, former State Representative and health care policy maker.
- Josie Johnson, long time civil rights leader and former administrator at the University of Minnesota.
- Allan Spear, former State Senator and long time leader of human rights.
- Congressman Bruce Vento, former congressman and long time environmental leader.

So with this award we honor the participants of VOICE, who have organized to improve their lives and, in the process, have enriched ours. I would like to call forward Vera Burstein to accept the Wellstone Call to Justice Award on behalf of the leadership and participants of the VOICE Community Building Initiative.