Rana Bell, Northeast Development Director, with officers and Philly event volunteers.
Photo by Bonnie Squires

Florida residents and snowbirds will already be familiar with JAFCO’s life saving work with the youngest members of the tribe. But Northeast residents should expect to start hearing the name JAFCO (Jewish Adoption and Foster Care Options) with great frequency, especially in New York, New Jersey and the Philadelphia area.

Currently, the JAFCO Jewish Children’s Village in Florida is the only one of its kind in the Jewish community in the United States, providing life-changing services for children and families. While they aren’t going to open anything on the scale that currently exists in Florida in the Philadelphia area anytime soon, “by the end of 2013, JAFCO will have been incorporated as a 501(c)3 in PA and qualified in NJ with the plan to work in collaboration with existing services to fill social service gaps within the Jewish community,” explained Rana Bell, who joined the JAFCO organization in Florida in 1999, and then relocated to Philadelphia to become director of JAFCO’s Northeast development project.

Bringing ten years of experience as a clinical social worker and a supervising coordinator at JAFCO’s Sunrise, Florida facility, Bell stressed, “This is a quality agency, built on community giving that is concerned with taking care of Jewish children who come from situations where there has been abuse. Many people incorrectly assume that these issues do not exist within the Jewish community.” Bell pointed out that the numbers of children helped at the JAFCO facility prove otherwise. “This year, over 400 abused or neglected children will receive services from JAFCO in Sunrise, Florida. For the 21 years JAFCO has been in existence, 4,000 children have directly benefited from these programs that find them foster care or adoptive homes.”

Liz Schneider had never heard of JAFCO until she moved from Bala Cynwyd, PA to Florida four years ago. While looking for something to replace the charity work she’d done in Philadelphia, a newspaper article about JAFCO motivated her to tour JAFCO’s Children’s Village in Sunrise.

Woman of Valor award-winner Linda Brodie and her husband Don Brodie enjoyed meeting 6abc Action News Reporter Amy Buckman, who served as Mistress of Ceremonies for the JAFCO luncheon. The Brodies just renewed their ten-year pledge as JAFCO godparents and also made their adult children godparents as well.

“After seeing firsthand that Jewish children are not immune to child abuse, I wanted to get involved and I immediately joined the board of the Weston, Florida chapter of JAFCO. I’d never realized there were Jewish children being physically and mentally abused by their parents,” Schneider said. “I think I will always remember the children I saw that day. It certainly changed my life and the way I feel about my social responsibility to help these children have an opportunity to grow into healthy, happy productive adults.”

With Bell in place in the tri-State area, the awareness, acceptance and support for JAFCO has been growing. “For the past six years, I’ve been laying the foundation,” stated Bell. “I’m trying to connect people in this area with the name JAFCO, getting our name out and raising funds.” Events such as parlor parties, tea parties, cocktail parties, even a golf tournament, have all been aimed at spreading awareness, showing people in this area what’s involved in helping these children, she explained. A deep connection exists between the Philadelphia region and Florida’s JAFCO facility that might not be obvious to people who don’t know about the organization.

“So many of the families served by JAFCO in Florida started out living in the northeast. For one reason or another things began to go downhill for them,” explained Bell. “When issues like mental illness, incarceration or drug abuse are involved, parents get caught in a downward cycle long before their children wind up getting referred to JAFCO.”

Bell described other factors and conditions that can contribute to a sudden downturn—when a parent gets sick or loses their job or there is a divorce. “They move to Florida hoping to make the situation better,” said Bell. “Sometimes they think: just need to get away from the cold or be near my own parents, who may be wonderful resources, as grandparents usually are. Desperate parents often turn to their own parents as people they can rely on for emotional or financial help.”
At the JAFCO Spring Into Summer Luncheon at the Hilton Philadelphia on City Avenue, Wendy Berkowitz (left) was the keynote speaker, welcomed by Northeast Philadelphia Region Chapter co-president Liz Schneider. Berkowitz has adopted two children from JAFCO, Florida, and Berkowitz’s moving personal story.

Photo by Bonnie Squires

Bell’s professional clinical experience with this population is matched by her enthusiasm and urgency about how JAFCO saves lives. The before and after stories Bell shares in a video during each of her tea party presentations show the effects mental illness, domestic abuse, violence, drug abuse and poverty have on a child’s life. Referral to JAFCO sets a process into motion that rescues these vulnerable children by changing the course of their lives.

Up to 50 children live in either an emergency children’s shelter or one of six group homes; there are mentoring programs, programs devoted to family preservation, foster care or adoption. These children are given a second chance for lives filled with positive experiences, stability and success. JAFCO is in the process of building a facility for special needs youngsters to give respite care for their caregivers, due to open this year.

Bell has gained many ambassadors for JAFCO, some of them snowbirds—residents who live part of the year in the northeast and spend a portion of their year in Florida where they are current JAFCO supporters. These donors now help Bell in her job as the northeast’s regional director, to spread the word about JAFCO.

After several years in Florida, Liz Schneider and her family came back to the Northeast, and now she serves as the co-president of Delaware Valley’s chapter of the organization, along with Stacy Gerwitz.

Schneider became passionate about her volunteer efforts with JAFCO in Florida, something she’s bought with her to the Philadelphia area. “I hope I can encourage other women to see the opportunity to do Tzedukah and understand the challenges faced by children who enter JAFCO and the happy children who emerge.”

“The JAFCO children have a place in my heart,” explained Schneider. “JAFCO makes it possible for these kids to be clean, safe and fed. What these kids are seeing they shouldn’t be seeing, and it truly seems unreal. I guess that’s why I speak from the heart informing people about the charity and the opportunity to get involved, either in Florida or in the Northeast.”

“One very generous South Jersey family, Mark and Kathy Bacall, have made a significant restricted gift to establish our new office in Philadelphia, and any expansion efforts done up north,” Bell explained. The plan is to hire a local social worker as they search for donated or affordable start up office space accessible to many suburbs near Philadelphia before obtaining the necessary licenses to be able to grow into a fully functioning local entity to provide services and make the world a safer place for children from homes where abuse exists.

While it will take many years until the necessary organization, planning and development are in place to duplicate the JAFCO facility that exists in Florida. At this time, they are looking to partner with another agency and provide family strengthening programs, Bell added.

“Gifts made by donors benefit the life saving work done by JAFCO in Florida. We need to connect people here to the JAFCO programs in existence and establish a dedicated capital campaign to support this work and these children. Fortunately, we’re finding people here who want to get involved, motivating and inspiring the community to come together to help. We’re educating the public and focusing on fund raising at the same time. May 8th marked the third annual luncheon and fashion show, attended by 300 enthusiastic supporters. It was so much fun and an amazing afternoon,” Schneider said. JAFCO received a lot of support from the Golden Slipper volunteers, which increased attendance at this year’s annual event. This summer, many JAFCO kids from Florida attended the Golden Slipper camp.

“There are two ways to look at the kids who use JAFCO’s services,” Bell emphasized. “You can see these children and understand the hardships they face and further understand what it will take to help them live normal lives. And it may be possible for you to go home and never give it a second thought. You might be able to keep your distance and just conclude that that is someone else’s problem. But for Jews, we see the truth that we are each responsible for one another, and if we don’t reach out and get involved to do our part, whatever we can, then we haven’t done our share, and it is definitely a shared burden. But it is also a shared treasure, too.”

To get involved with JAFCO, call Rana Bell at 954-394-1168, Liz Schneider at 610-761-3607. Find out about events around the country on their website, www.jafco.org.