

Passion for Mental Health: The Smiths Endow JFS's Counseling Center Waiting Room



When “**The Leah and Dr. Gary Smith Family Counseling Center Waiting Room**” at Jewish Family Service was officially named on Wednesday, July 3, the entire family was there to enjoy the ceremony honoring their recent ‘Build a Living Legacy’ endowment.

Submitted by: Jewish Family Service of Cincinnati

There are at least three subjects that stir an appreciable passion in Leah and Gary Smith. The first is mental health. The second is giving back to the community. And the third is Jewish Family Service of Cincinnati (JFS). So it was only fitting when the Smiths chose to make a significant donation to JFS—providing them with naming rights for the agency’s counseling center waiting room. This waiting room serves a full spectrum of JFS’s mental health clients, from youth and teens to older adults. The gift was a first-of-its-kind “Building a Living Legacy” donation—a new opportunity for benefactors to give back during their lifetime so they can observe and appreciate the fruits of their labor.

Gary was quick to point out that naming rights were neither his nor Leah’s primary goal. But after many long conversations with JFS CEO Liz Vogel, JFS Agency Director of Development Erica Nyberg, they decided the best fit for their endowment would be naming rights that accented the exceptional mental health services the organization provides. “Every time we would walk by there [the waiting room] for meetings or whatever,” Gary said, “we’d be able to see that we made a difference in people’s lives—and in the ability of JFS to provide counseling, long-term. We really wanted this to be a sustainable program, and we felt that counseling was the area that we, and our family, wanted to endow.”

Leah concurred. “Liz and Erica gave us great guidance. And they were nurturing, too. They knew we wanted to do something substantial. We met several times, we had conversations with family members, but we just couldn’t decide. But then we landed on mental health and we knew that was it. That was the right choice.”

Leah explained why counseling, in particular, resonated with her. “There is some history with mental health in my family,” she said. “My father—we think he probably had PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] from being a bombardier in World War II. That was really a rough time for my mom and him.” Leah said that stigmas surrounding mental health were so pervasive at the time, no one in her family could talk openly about what they were going through. “My mother was never able to talk about it with anyone. If she were alive today, she’d see how

embracing we all are toward the challenges of mental health, and how there is no shame in it. I think she'd find comfort in that."

Gary's passion for mental health can be traced back at least to his college days, when he pursued a double major in Psychology and Sociology and a double minor in Anatomy and Physiology. "Understanding the mind and body helps us develop personal plans to prevent and deal with the stress of day-to-day life," Gary said. More recently, he has researched and written about mental health topics—such as loneliness, depression, anxiety, and addiction—while participating in the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs and the Men's Club at Adath Israel Congregation.

"I believe the entire country is in a mental health crisis," Gary said. "Early this year, I wrote a module on loneliness and I learned that 90 percent of the people in America suffer some sort of distress from loneliness. And since JFS has been so important to our community when it comes to mental health services, we felt it was important to begin the process of supporting the organization while we were still alive. And so, the counseling waiting room seemed like the ideal opportunity to show our passion. It was also a perfect way of showing our children about *tzedakah* [justice] and the value of giving."

On Wednesday, July 3, at JFS Headquarters—with staff, friends, and the entire Smith family present—a formal ceremony to acknowledge and celebrate the endowment was held by the organization. The counseling center waiting room was officially named "The Leah and Dr. Gary Smith Family Counseling Center Waiting Room."

The Smiths expressed confidence that their "Building a Living Legacy" endowment will help sustain an already excellent program. "The quality of the counseling at Jewish Family Service is amazing," Leah said. "It's great to know that we have this available to the community. And people talk about it and they say, 'I went to JFS. They were wonderful.' In fact, I recently recommended JFS to a friend of mine, and she went and she was just so thrilled with her experience. Honestly, I don't know where the services are any better."