



Network-Weaving with Becky Voorwinde

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Deborah Fishman sits with Becky Voorwinde.

This interview is part of the [Network-Weaver Series](#).

[Becky Voorwinde is the Co-Director, Director of Strategy & Community Engagement for the [Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel \(BYFI\)](#). She is currently on maternity leave following the recent birth of her daughter, Miriam Zahavah.]

What is a network?

A network is a group of people who are connected based on some level of shared experience, interest, or demographic – sometimes more than one characteristic. What’s interesting about networks is the way they can be multi-layered. BYFI is multi-generational – we’ve been around for 25 years – and we have people from various religious backgrounds, geographic locations, professional backgrounds, and life experiences. There are some shared interests but also distinct differences, and that’s what can make it really enriching.

Tell me more about the BYFI network.

We’re pushing 1000 community members – over 600 alumni in North America and 260 in Israel (our program also includes Israelis). Because the fellowship is selective, the members share internal personal characteristics. We’re looking for people with intense intellectual curiosity, a sense of responsibility for the world, who are looking to do something with their talent, and who are articulate and looking to grow and learn from others. Those core characteristics set us up for a network that can be really generative.

One strain for how the network connects is discussion – sharing ideas and progressing thinking around issues. We have a very active alumni listserv which is topically based. We also have an annual alumni magazine and events and programs that seed conversation and keep the network thinking about the big issues. While staff help think about issues, it’s very much user-generated; there’s no parameter as to what fits.

The other stream is creating personal and professional connections. We send regular emails to the community with job opportunities; we encourage alumni to share opportunities they know about, come across, or are recruiting for. There’s also personal networking. Last year,

we had an alumna who was a junior in college and spending a month in Los Angeles to explore her interest in standup comedy. Several alumni working in the professional writing space in Los Angeles were willing to meet up with her. One of them sponsored her for an open mic night – all because of this one link of being a BYFI alumna. They knew the quality of the individual would be worth their time.

To what extent and how do you and other BYFI staff weave this network?

A lot of it begins through our efforts. Naamah Paley, a BYFI alumna, recently joined our staff. At an event we were hosting while I was on maternity leave, the group was asked, “What brought you here?” Five out of eight answered that it was because Naamah or I had connected to them, not specifically about that event, but just to go out to coffee or talk. When we do that kind of outreach, it’s very clear that we’re not just looking to get them back into the fold for the sake of our program; we’re very interested in them and their development. We’re looking to hear what’s happening in their lives.

During these one-on-one catch-ups, inevitably lots of connections come to mind for me – I can pull up suggestions of who they should be talking to within the community. Access to these connections prompts those individuals who are assisted to get others excited about the network. If a door was opened to you because of a network, you become receptive to opening a door to others.

We in particular utilize our Alumni Advisory Board as contacts and ambassadors of the program. We have an Alumni Venture Fund which hosts a fundraising campaign and then alumni can apply for grants. Our board as well as other alumni serve as fundraisers, and instead of doing a phone-a-thon, they each send emails to 10 people and ask them to set up a time to chat. We don’t want the intensity of a traditional phone-a-thon where you move as quickly as you can to the next call. Each year we also email our community and ask what specific skills they have that they could offer to potential grantees and other alumni more generally. 15-20% of the community responds with what they’re able to offer and what they’re interested in being engaged in.

The key is being specific. It’s hard for people to be of service at times because they don’t realize how they can be utilizing a network. When you give examples through stories, it becomes concrete.

How do you manage all of this information about the alumni?

We have a very robust database through Salesforce. Right now it’s only used internally; it’s very useful for us to sort, track, and keep conscious of what’s happening in people’s lives. Even something as simple as where people studied abroad can help others who go abroad, whether they want to hold a seder or a recommendation of a good coffees shop.

Also, in our annual magazine, we solicit updates from all alumni, and the response rate is exceptionally high. Sometimes people read what’s written and say they want to connect to people they’ve read about. It also helps us understand in the aggregate some themes running

amongst alumni, to put together cohorts we hadn't thought about before.

What challenges are you currently facing?

One frontier we're trying to figure out is in the area of connecting Israeli and American alumni. Right now we don't have a shared virtual space; the conversations happening on our listserv are for the American community, and the Israelis have a facebook group. Therefore, we have less interconnection when it comes to sharing resources and networking suggestions. We haven't yet entirely found how to make connections where there's some interesting global crossover, or even how much demand there is for that.

What are some best practices of network-weaving?

You have to have a genuine passion for and interest in other people. It can't be self-serving – that you want to check names off a list or ask people for money or volunteer time. The desire to really know each person and see them succeed has to be the core of the connection; it's authentic and can't be faked. That's why I use "community" interchangeably with "network" in describing BYFI. It goes beyond the utilitarian "networking" (though I think the term networking gets a bad rap) – it's about that community connection.

This post is cross-posted on Deborah's blog, hachavaya.blogspot.com, as a part of her ongoing conversation series with network-weavers about their best practices.