# **History**

In the wake of Kristallnacht in 1938, a small group of Jewish community leaders in St. Louis met to address the existential threat of a growing anti-Semitism that was expanding in Europe.  Those community leaders, representing seven organizations, created and signed a Constitution of a new organization on December 28, 1938, the Jewish Coordinating Council.

This Council was formed to respond to the barrage of vilification and anti-Semitism that emanated from Nazi Germany and spread throughout the world.  The goal was to create Jewish interagency collaboration at a time of such severe threat. Locally, individuals and organizations, such as the St. Louis Bund, were spreading Nazi propaganda, and among the Council’s first actions was an objection to the sale of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" in St. Louis.

During World War II, anti-Semitism increased. The Council worked with interfaith and civic groups and individuals of good will to fight vicious rumors and refute misconceptions. It opposed discrimination in housing and employment, maintained an extensive War Records file, and tracked the number of Jewish soldiers who fought and died in the war.

In 1945, the name of the Jewish Coordinating Council was changed to the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC). The JCRC joined other local community councils across the United States to form the National Community Relations Advisory Council (NACRAC), now called the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA).
The focus in the early decades was on interfaith and intergroup relations. The JCRC continued in the mission to combat extremism and racism, and gradually shifted from the “melting pot” theory of organization to that of cultural pluralism, developing and building on the concept of intercultural education.

The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 was reflected locally in intensified activities relating to interpretation of issues relating to the new state and its need for security.  Through the years, JCRC organized community efforts in the face of the Six Day War, Yom Kippur War, Intifadas, the wars in Lebanon, terrorist attacks, the conflict in Gaza and peace efforts.  JCRC focuses on responses to efforts to delegitimize Israel and the threat of boycotts, divestment and sanctions, known as the BDS movement. Another current focus is the creating of civil dialogue on Israel and the peace process.

In the face of the Civil Rights movement that began in the 1950’s, and acting on the belief that no group is secure until all are secure, the JCRC worked to establish equal opportunity for all in a then totally segregated St. Louis and in the State of Missouri. JCRC helped to establish the Mayor’s Council on Human Rights and worked with the St. Louis Housing Authority to desegregate public housing, and worked with the Board of Education to desegregate public schools.

In the late 1960’s, JCRC responded to the plight of Soviet Jews who desired to leave the land of their birth where their ability to live as Jews was severely limited. JCRC staged its first mass meeting in St. Louis in support of Soviet Jewry in 1965, and many rallies and demonstrations followed, including the well attended “Don’t Let the Lights Go Out” demonstration in Kiener Plaza in November, 1986. JCRC led 300 St. Louisans to Washington to join a rally of over 250,000 demonstrators in Washington D.C. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the freeing of its Jewish population to live as Jews, the St. Louis Riga Sister Community Project was created in 1990 to assist in community building. in collaboration with the then Jewish Hospital, Barnes and Children’s Hospitals, a far reaching medical aid project was developed.

Through the generosity of the Bohn Family Social Justice Initiative, the JCRC began a more in-depth focus on social justice issues. It began to work in partnership with Jewish agencies, congregations and local organizations to engage individuals and groups in meaningful social justice learning and effective social action projects, most of which take place within the St. Louis interfaith/intergroup community. The Community Against Poverty (CAP) Coalition, an interfaith and intergroup effort that addresses poverty issues, was established in 2008.

Creation of the Michael and Barbara Newmark Institute for Human Relations in 2010 serves to greatly enhance relationship building with religious, racial and ethnic groups. Partnerships with area universities are a feature of the program.   An additional outgrowth of the Newmark Institute is  the annual 9/11 Interfaith Commemoration in Music and Arts & Faith St. Louis.

The JCRC works in five focus areas: Israel, International Issues, Domestic Issues, Social Justice and Interfaith/Intergroup Relations. It shifted its approach from reactive and defensive to proactive. The JCRC has administered the Rabbi Robert P. Jacobs Jewish Fund for Human Needs since its establishment in 1985.  JFHN is a joint project of the JCRC and the St. Louis Rabbinical Association, with support from the Jewish Federation of St. Louis and the Lubin-Green Foundation.

The Student to Student program, created in 1990, recruits high school teens to reach out to schools that have no Jewish presence, and works to reduce prejudice using peer to peer connections.

Today, the newly expanded JCRC Council is composed of thirty community organizations and synagogues and fourteen at-large members. JCRC continues to bring the community together, by convening, coordinating, collaborating, and taking action.