

## Lessons learned

By Sarah Fields  
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Sarah Fields



The end of the year is often a time to reflect and create goals for the future.

In the last few hours of 1985, I made my entrance into the world. Dec. 31 is a real mixed bag of a birthday. My father was a fan from the start, saying that the child tax deduction for the year I was only alive for a few hours was a great deal. As a kid, I disliked my birthday, even as a Jew, the hubbub of the end of the year and December seemed to eclipse my moment — with school on break and friends out of town, birthdays were fairly subdued by children’s standards. As an adult, I find that birthdays ending in 5 or 0 are really the only ones worth making a fuss over and for the most part I enjoy the end-of-year change in age.

The end of the year coinciding with one's birthday means an awful lot of space for contemplation. As we look toward 2024, the conclusion of 2023 has not been one to inspire much in the way of optimism. Despite the geopolitical conflicts overseas, economic inequities in our region and an unproductive Congress, I am committing to bringing the lessons of a great friend and mentor into 2024. However, it is with a great deal of sadness that I must say goodbye to that friend.

I first met Richard "Dick" Heiman when I moved to San Mateo to work for the Jewish Community Relations Council. In a very active retirement, he had served on the board of directors for the organization and was a close supporter and adviser for years. Little did I know that our first meeting, lunch at his favorite restaurant, the Peninsula Golf and Country Club's Dining Room, would be the beginning of a meaningful friendship in service to bringing people of different faiths together to learn and give back with one another.

In many ways, we were quite different and not just from the four plus decades of life experience he had on me. Dick had gone to Carnegie Mellon, trained as an engineer and later became an executive for a manufacturing company in Ohio owned by Berkshire Hathaway. He maintained his midwestern friendliness and tastes, never wanting spicy food. He was for a time, and perhaps even at the end of his life, a registered Republican, quite literally a country club Republican. And yet, in the face of those differences, we discovered a tremendous number of shared values.

Dick's deep commitment to Peninsula Temple Beth El's Interfaith Friendship Committee and the Peninsula Multifaith Coalition stemmed from his time in the Army working as a chaplain's aide. He believed, and often remarked, that "We can never have too many friends." His friendships were not transactional, but compilations of meaningful moments of teaching and learning, shared meals and strategizing. Even in retirement, his CEO's mind did not rest. If he saw a community partner in trouble or vulnerable, he wanted to know what could be done? He also wanted to know how we could celebrate more with one another. Dick was especially dedicated to bringing the local Jewish and Muslim communities together. He recognized our likeness as much greater than our differences.

He played tennis nearly every day, "a game for life" he often remarked; and golfed once or twice a week. I was incredibly fortunate to play tennis on many occasions with him, even though his skills far surpassed mine. He was a kind and generous father to his daughter Laura and her husband JD, along with his son Michael, who preceded him in death. Dick was a great friend to many, when he would take a break from his local poker group and country club activities, he often visited fraternity brothers around the country and his adopted grandchildren in Massachusetts. He loved going to the symphony and corny jokes.

After a brief illness, Dick passed away Dec. 22 and, as we say in our tradition, may his memory be a blessing. His 84 years in life and over two decades in San Mateo brought people together who did not always naturally do so. In his memory, reach out a hand in 2024 to someone you may not see eye to eye with, after all — you can never have too many friends.

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