

Press Release

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Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience to Open in New Orleans

Jackson, MS – The Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL) is excited to announce that the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience (MSJE) is expected to re-open in 2019 as an independent entity, located in New Orleans.

The ISJL and the MSJE share a proud history. In 1986 the MSJE was established to preserve, interpret, and document the long and rich tradition of Jewish life in the South through exhibits, public programs, publications, historic preservation, and community outreach across the country. With the founding of the ISJL in 2000, the MSJE was incorporated into the larger ISJL, with ongoing museum and heritage programming.

However, the historic and ongoing Southern Jewish story warrants two full-fledged regional organizations to preserve and promote it—and now, that’s just what there will be.

The original site of the MSJE was on the grounds of the Henry S. Jacobs Camp in Utica, Mississippi. In 2012, the museum closed the doors of its Utica site, planning to relocate in order to enable the camp to repurpose the building for its own programming. The ISJL put much of the collection into safe, climate-controlled storage and continued its ongoing “museum without walls” programs, putting photo exhibits and interactive programs like the Traveling Trunk in communities across the South and beyond.

A committee formed by a former ISJL board chair, Jay Tanenbaum, began researching how and where to open a new museum. This included a feasibility study conducted by Gallagher & Associates, a global leader in museum design. Ultimately, it was determined that New Orleans would be an ideal home to a new and expanded Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, and the committee forged ahead with museum planning. Tanenbaum, of Atlanta, Georgia, now serves as MSJE chair, with other former ISJL board members Morris Mintz of Monroe, Louisiana, and Rusty Palmer of San Antonio, Texas, serving as vice-chairs.

With a task force including other volunteers assembled and the feasibility study in hand, the MSJE privately began seeking lead donors. After enthusiastic support was received, the new museum recently named Kenneth Hoffman as its executive director. Hoffman, a Baton Rouge native, has a long resume in the museum world including time as the MSJE’s first intern. He has worked at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans since its opening in 2000, most recently as education director.

A location in New Orleans' cultural and arts district has been identified as the future home of the MSJE. The primary exhibit designer will be Gallagher & Associates. The MSJE continues its private phase capital campaign, with plans to open a broader public campaign by the end of this year. The MSJE will be an interactive, multimedia experience where visitors can learn about Jews in the south and develop a better understanding of what it means to be a Southerner and an American.

The Museum is poised to become a tourist destination—a state-of-the-art facility and historic, heartfelt testament to the legacy of Judaism in the South. The ISJL and MSJE will be two separate organizations, although they will remain supportive of one another and promote synergies through cross-board representation.

“We’re very excited for the museum’s future,” says Macy B. Hart, ISJL president and original founder of the MSJE. “There’s such a rich history of Southern Jewish life in this region, and under, Jay, Morris, and Rusty and Kenneth’s leadership, along with the whole team they’ll assemble, we know that history will be shared in a dynamic and engaging way. Meanwhile, the Southern Jewish story is still unfolding—and at the ISJL we’re proud to play a role in supporting and enhancing Jewish life throughout the region.”

Tanenbaum adds: “It’s both a challenge and an honor to have this opportunity to re-establish the MSJE as a vibrant new project. I am humbled by the reception we have received in reaching out to new partners and supporters. With 10 million visitors a year, New Orleans gives us the ability to engage a much larger audience with the lessons of hope, tolerance, and leadership demonstrated through the stories of Southern Jewry.”

With a shared history and an interconnected vision, these two organizations are committed to working in partnership to preserve and share stories of the Southern Jewish past, and to work together as integral entities in the landscape of the Southern Jewish present and future.

The Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL) promotes Jewish life and heritage in the South through innovative programs and shared resources, serving communities seeking new solutions or where Jewish resources are limited. To learn more about the ISJL visit www.isjl.org.

The Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience (MSJE) is set to open in New Orleans in 2019 and will explore what it means to be a Southerner, a Jew, and an American. To sign up to receive updates on its progress, to take a survey about the museum and what its content should include, or to learn more, visit www.msje.org.

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