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By Jarrad Saffren

Jay Spector is 73. He's worked for JEVS Human Services for more than 40 years. He's led the nonprofit organization as president and CEO for the last quarter-century.

So, when explaining his recent decision to retire, Spector said, "It's time."

"It's time to turn the reins over to some new people," he added. "And it's time to move on and do other things with my life."

Before doing so, though, Spector reflected on his legacy with the organization that, according to its website, helps people "lead self-determined, connected and hopeful lives that strengthen themselves, their families and their communities."

And it's a big legacy.

JEVS now serves more than 25,000 people per year, according to Spector. During his tenure, it has grown from its original mission of helping people find employment to one of helping them build careers and lives.

The nonprofit now has partnerships across all sectors, including with private, public and philanthropic organizations.

Spector is stepping down on Feb. 7. He will be replaced by Cynthia Figueroa, who comes to JEVS after several years of working for the City of Philadelphia.

“I really had an opportunity to turn JEVS into a significant human service nonprofit allowing individuals to live independent lives,” Spector said. “It’s been incredibly rewarding.”

As he thought back on his career, the outgoing president did some math. Forty-plus years of helping thousands of people each year.

“That’s a large number,” he said.

When he examined his time with JEVS more deeply, Spector identified one key area where he made a big impact: expanding opportunities for young people.

In 1979, the year Spector joined the organization, JEVS already ran the Orleans Vocational Center. But in 2007, under his leadership, the nonprofit expanded the center into Orleans Technical College.

The school, based in Philadelphia, offers trade and technology courses that can help launch careers.

“We built a new school that was more state-of-the-art,” Spector said.

“That has been a significant piece of my accomplishments,” he added. “Being able to keep it flowing with students and financial resources.”

Spector also pointed to another youth program, Project WOW, as a strong part of his legacy.

Project WOW focuses on helping kids that JEVS describes as “disconnected youth.” Those are young people who are out of school without having earned high school diplomas.

The project is a 22-week course in trades and technologies that is combined with a GED program. That way, students graduate from WOW with the core credential, a high school diploma and the skills that will enable them to compete in the economy.

“That can lead to life-sustaining jobs and careers,” Spector said.

Spector said that in helping young people, the nonprofit is staying true to its original mission, too. The organization started in 1941 to help Jewish refugees.

JEVS was aiding a specific group of people with a specific set of problems. It is still doing that to this day, even if it doesn’t just assist Jewish refugees anymore. Spector’s organization serves both Jews and non-Jews, too.

“It’s really about tikkun olam. How to repair the world,” Spector said. “As a Jew, I look at it like we have a responsibility to ensure that everybody has an opportunity.”

The outgoing CEO is leaving Figueroa with a wide-ranging and multifaceted organization. JEVS had about 200 staff members when Spector took over in the 1990s. Now it has almost 1,000.

Lisa Washington, the chair of JEVS' board of directors who has served on the board for more than a decade, said those staffers will miss their longtime leader.

"He is the ultimate mensch," Washington added. "He has the biggest heart and is the most caring person."

The board chair believes that Spector's success is the result of his attitude. Over many years and decades, he has never changed in that regard. He has always stayed positive.

"After being in this business for as long as he's been in, to not be cynical, to have hope, to still be able to feel like he can make a difference, is just amazing to me," she said. "I work at it every day, but it's not that easy."

In retirement, Spector hopes to stay active with JEVS' foundation and as a public policy advocate, focusing on issues around poverty.

He also wants to spend more time with his wife, Genie Cohen, his two sons, Michael and Adam Spector, and his four grandsons, all under 10.

"It's the passage of time," he said of his retirement. "I loved the work I did. It was a hard decision to make."