

InFocus

Diane Charness



Diane Charness credits her experience chairing Washington Hebrew Congregation's Mitzvah Day about a decade ago with helping to focus her career on nonprofits.

"I oversaw the organization and implementation of about 100 projects and 1,500 volunteers," she says about heading the D.C. synagogue's one-day service project.

A Chevy Chase resident, she was impressed with the work that nonprofits do, and eventually put her expertise toward recruiting for charitable organizations.

Charness, who grew up in Deal, N.J., originally had an interest in international relations. Wanting to attend a women's college, she set out for Newcomb College at Tulane University. "I had a wonderful two years there," she says, and fell in love with New Orleans.

For family reasons, however, she ended up transferring to Georgetown University's School of Foreign Relations, with an eye toward entering the foreign service.

She was drawn to the "process of learning about history, cultures, and I am fascinated with traveling," says Charness, 53, an avid cyclist who has gone on biking trips in Europe.

She, however, gave up on her foreign service dream when she realized that her foreign language skills were not strong enough.

Charness took a job with a management consulting firm, and began pursuing her master's of business administration at George Washington University. She later held strategic planning and marketing positions with IIT and Marriott before deciding in 1988 that it was time to step back from the career world and focus on her children. She soon became an active volunteer at Washington Hebrew and later served two terms on its board.

She entered the search and staffing business in 1993. "I was looking for interim consulting projects as a MBA," Charness says, and discovered that friends — stay-at-home moms who were lawyers, accountants and other professionals — were also seeking to keep their hands in the work world.

A light bulb went off: Charness created Flextime Staffing, which focused on inter-

im assignments for professionals.

Her timing was excellent, she says. The company was created at the end of the last big recession, she continues, when "companies were ready to hire, but not make permanent positions."

As one of only two such firms nationwide, she says, "We really began to grow and fill a void."

About a decade later, one of her clients, Georgetown University, recruited her to come in house and recruit for the university. She finished up assignments for Flextime Staffing, put the company on hold and joined the university, recruiting everyone from plumbers and electricians to senior executives.

"I started developing an expertise in the nonprofit search world," Charness says.

She stayed for three years, then relaunched Flextime as Higher Talent, brought in partner Mindy Suissa and focused exclusively on placements for nonprofits.

"It is so fulfilling to assist a nonprofit organization whose mission is compelling," says Charness, whose clients have included universities, hospitals and arts centers. "We kind of fall in love with all of our clients. There is not one of them that is not doing great things."

One of those clients has allowed her, in a sense, to come full circle.

Tulane University has retained Higher Talent as it expands its staffing for development and outreach. The company has also recruited for the private Isadore Newman School in New Orleans.

"We feel like we're really contributing to the infrastructure, the rebuilding of the city," Charness says. "It's a real labor of love because I had been at [Tulane] as a freshman and sophomore. I've gotten to reconnect with the city, with its leaders. It's just been a joy and it's been a very successful business relationship." — *Debra Rubin*

Suggestions for profiles may be sent to infocus@washingtonjewishweek.com.

Name: Diane Charness
Hebrew name: Laza
Birthday: Sept. 18, 1957
Lives in: Chevy Chase
Favorite Jewish holiday: Rosh Hashanah
Favorite Jewish food: brisket
Favorite Jewish celebrity: Elle Wiesel