



Brandeis



Diana '22 making a call

GENERATION TO GENERATION

STUDENT-TO-ALUMNI CALLING PROGRAM
FINAL REPORT

FUNDED BY THE
*LOUIS D. BRANDEIS LEGACY FUND
FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE
BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY
SUMMER 2020*

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Funded by the Louis D. Brandeis Legacy Fund for Social Justice
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Summary:

Thanks to the generosity of the *Louis D. Brandeis Legacy Fund for Social Justice*, during the summer of 2020 Brandeis University implemented ***Generation to Generation (G2G)***. *G2G* was a four-week outreach program for current students to call segments of the alumni population to ease the stressors of extended periods of isolation. This program was developed in response to the expected increase in loneliness and loss of community as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine.

Isolation and loneliness are key factors which can negatively impact a person's mental and physical wellbeing. Due to the pandemic there has been a perceived increase in both isolation and loneliness especially among those who are ages 60 or above. In this time there has also been a decrease in job or internship opportunity for undergraduate students. *Generation to Generation* was designed to address both issues.

Three student callers were hired to call alumni on the phone to discuss their shared experiences as Brandeisians, check on well-being, share news from Brandeis, convey opportunities for future engagement, and have relationship-building conversations. Student callers led into each call hoping for an extended conversation from 20 to 60 minutes in length, taking cues from the alumnus/a to determine what they want from the call. Each caller asked questions that generated more in-depth conversations with the goal of building relationships and connections. Topics ranged from life at Brandeis to current events and COVID-19.

Results:

Over the course of four weeks three *G2G* interns spent a total of 179 hours calling or in conversation with alumni. Students were given a spreadsheet of roughly 9,000 contacts and sorted it to start with the oldest graduating class and work their way through to the more recent years. Through manually dialing using Google Voice a total of 2,070 attempts were made, including a second call for a number of alumni. Overall, 294 conversations were had with alumni.

After each completed call, the student interns recorded videos which were then emailed to the alumnus/a, thanking them for talking and highlighting key points of the conversation. These were sent out within a week of the conversation and recipients had the option to respond via email or video. We received several responses, every single one was positive and thankful for the interaction. Several offered follow-up conversations or future networking opportunities.

Overall *G2G* was very successful and a joy to be a part of. Positive relationships were fostered through the student-alumni connection. This has the potential to be an important part of our alumni outreach and engagement efforts moving forward.

Caitlin Denton an MA candidate in Sustainable International Development / Women's Gender & Sexuality Studies at the Heller School for Social Policy & Management and a graduate assistant in the Institutional Advancement Division administered G2G.

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Notes from the student callers:

“I have had some incredible conversations thus far covering topics from spirituality, to life under the pandemic, to discussing the different operas of Bernstein. I have received so much positive feedback while making these calls from the alumni. It has been great to hear about how much the campus has changed over time while the essence of Brandeis and the student body has stayed the same.” -Diana Epstein '22

“This program has enabled me to have quality, enriching conversations with people who I would have never had the chance to "meet" if it were not for Brandeis's network! I really appreciate this program and my ability to reach out to so many alumni!” -Leora Sanders '22

“I don't think it was something that they would have expected Brandeis to do and I think they were grateful to talk with someone who they can relate to.” – Rebecah Kennedy '22

Responses from alumni:

“Thank you Diana, and so nice speaking with you. I have told most of my friends/classmates about the virtual programs at Brandeis. It is wonderful for us now. And I loved your video.”

“Dear Leora, It was a wonderful experience for me as it was for you. I always felt and still do feel that Brandeis was an awakening.”

“Thanks VERY much! Both for the call and the follow up...My Brandeis experience was memorable. I appreciated your call.”

“Diana, it's so nice to see your pretty face! I enjoyed our phone visit as well. Brandeis has grown into a remarkable university. You are so fortunate to be a student there. I wish you a successful year, with good health and normal classes.”

The following pages include final reports from each of the student describing their own experiences as G2G interns this summer.

Final Report from Leora Sanders '22

When reflecting on the implications that COVID-19 has had on our communities, the term “social isolation” comes to mind. Throughout this global pandemic, the extent to which different groups of people experienced social isolation has varied. It is important to note that the elderly, in particular, notably experience solitude regardless of the current epidemic. Seniors often undergo feelings of loneliness and isolation, which can lead to serious health conditions such as an increased risk of dementia, heart disease and even death.¹ Therefore, it is of great importance to ensure that seniors, who are more likely to experience social isolation, remain connected, continue to socialize and are not made to feel neglected from society due to their age. In order to prevent seniors from feeling ostracized within their communities, fostering inter-generational communications and relationships is mutually beneficial for both the younger and older generations involved.

Over the last four weeks, I have had the privilege of being a part of the Generation to Generation Alumni Outreach Program. A program created to enable current Brandeis University students to connect with older alumni. Aside from the fact that this program has allowed me to gain a first-hand account of how isolating and vexing quarantine has been for so many alumni, I have also been able to connect with an extensive amount of accomplished, well-traveled individuals. Even though many of the alumni I spoke with are now retired, I was incredibly impressed by their lived-experiences, their career paths and their ambitions for a continuance of their education in the present day. I had the pleasure of speaking with an alumnus who not only claimed to have chosen Brandeis for its Kosher food selection, but who also relayed the importance of taking time to work or travel between my undergraduate degree program and law school to discover my own passions, as he was a lawyer for many years prior. I also spoke with an alumna who had the incredible opportunity to host and cook dinner for Eleanor Roosevelt while she was on campus administering lectures. One customary takeaway from these conversations was the comparison between Brandeis’ campus from the late 1950s and early 60s to the present day. When reflecting on how the campus has changed over the years, many spoke about the Castle, a trademark of Brandeis’ campus, in great detail and with fond memories. In addition to the Castle, many spoke about the only two residence halls on campus that were divided by gender; plus, many told stories about the amazing food in the dining halls and walking up the daunting hill to get to the northern part of campus where the humanities department resided.

Throughout my experience, I noticed that many alumni were exceedingly willing to speak with me merely because we have a shared experience of attending Brandeis University. This commonality allowed me to connect and form relationships with a considerable amount of people. Regardless of how long our conversations lasted, everyone was so touched that their

¹ “Loneliness and Social Isolation Linked to Serious Health Conditions.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 26 May 2020, www.cdc.gov/aging/publications/features/lonely-older-adults.html.

alma mater was thinking of them and that we genuinely wanted to hear about their current well-being as well as their life since attending Brandeis. I was especially amazed by how many alumni were so inclined to stay in touch with me through emails and phone calls as well as offered to grab socially-distant meals upon my arrival to campus. Taking the time to call this group of alumni had a lasting impact on both those who received a call and also on myself. I obtained an even greater appreciation for the opportunity to attend an institution filled with thoughtful and learned professors as well as the chance to be surrounded by such an uplifting community of people. Through connecting with so many alumni, it is clear that Brandeis University's academic reputation has preceded itself from the beginning and the tradition of social justice initiatives driving its student body to enact change among their communities has also continued from the start. Therefore, thank you for allowing me to listen to people's stories regarding their travels, their family, their careers, their career advice, their heritage and a variety of other topics. I thoroughly enjoyed my conversations with these alumni and noticed how a genuine phone call provided people an outlet to socialize and meet someone new who could learn so much from their past experiences. From generation to generation stories, advice and laughter can all be passed down; therefore, I sincerely hope that the university continues this program and continues to discover ways in which we can leave meaningful impacts on both our alumni and current students.

Final Report from Diana Epstein '22

Through the Legacy Fund Alumni Outreach Program, I was able to call over 600 of Brandeis's alumni and talk to over 130 of them. These conversations have provided for many laughs, stories, advice, and most importantly a sense of connection. As each conversation passed, I learned and developed active listening skills which present differently whether on zoom, phone, in person or over email. These calls not only gave me snapshots into the early days of Brandeis but also gave insight into the difficulties of aging both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. While I came into the internship ready for the Brandeis stories and the great conversations what I learned is that everyone around me has an important story and wisdom to share from their own experiences.

Isolation and loneliness in the elderly was a nationwide issue before Covid-19 struck with their effects being that much worse during this time of social distancing. A common trend I found through my calls was that often the loneliest were jaded to the world and quick to hang up. Often they were assuming I was a robot calling or a solicitor and hung up before I could explain otherwise. I can understand this though, it must be hard living all alone having to take every call when 90% of them are probably someone trying to scam them and the other 5% of their calls from doctors or about appointments. However, in the cases where I was able to hold a substantial conversation with the alumnus/a who lived alone without family nearby, it was clear how much they appreciated the call and how it made their day to know someone was thinking of them. I found this trend to be true with individuals who live with others, they were both happy and shocked to find out I was not calling for money as well as pleased to know the Brandeis was checking in on their well-being. Another trend I found throughout the calling included how important the Castle was to these alumni particularly to the 'Pioneers' (Students from the first four classes). They described walking into the common room on a Friday afternoon to see Eleanor Roosevelt chatting with 10 students or Leonard Bernstein playing the Piano. The faculty at Brandeis used to live in apartments within the Castle and invite students over for dinner thus creating such a unique and intimate environment. They attended Brandeis before accreditation and when the campus was almost bare of buildings. Over time the Brandeis campus has become unrecognizable and foreign to them but what remained true was the castle and their experiences. It is evident that while the look of the campus has changed dramatically over the decades the energy and vibrance of the student community have stayed true and strong to those early days.

As there is no end in sight to this pandemic and even after that no end in sight to that national loneliness epidemic plaguing the elderly I think it vital for Brandeis as a whole to do more programs like this one to check in on the elderly both from Brandeis and around. When talking to alumni it seemed that calling was a great way for sustained conversation. With a handful of individuals, their hearing had deteriorated so much that they were unable to maintain a conversation over the phone perhaps with these individuals' emails or letter writing could be a better way to engage them. When talking to one alumnus they spoke that when it comes to fundraising it should first be friendship then money. Having worked at Brandeis's Phonathon I know that as callers we are only able to make surface-level connections before asking for money. So, it would be interesting and worthwhile to possibly do a buddy or pen pal type system where

alumni who are interested in being connected and having more genuine interactions with students sign up and are then paired with a student to have recurring conversations as opposed to just one-offs. A significant portion of my prospects told me that if I had more time at the end of my calls they would love to hear from me again. From my time as a student I know there are a variety of Waltham groups/service groups who work with elderly in the area so perhaps there could be a collaborative effort with these groups to reach out to Brandeis's older alumni for sustained interactions. Another idea for further engagement that would be a lot easier to implement is perhaps starting class listservs for the early classes to reconnect. This would allow for old friends who perhaps lost people's numbers or addresses throughout the years to reconnect and reminisce about their times. I believe either the class of 1960 or 1961 has something like this set up for their reunion or yearbook and I heard from many of them how much they appreciated it. This would also ease the process of making reunions, particularly over zoom. I think this would be relatively simple to set up and much appreciated by our alumni.

Overall, I have loved being an intern for the Legacy Alumni Outreach program. These past four weeks have been a break from the social isolation of this pandemic and have provided genuine laughs. I have learned and heard incredible stories from our alumni some of whom spent their childhood avoiding being bombed or killed during WWII, had friends and family drafted in college to the Vietnam War, and who are now surviving a global pandemic. Discussions like these provided me with some perspective that while this Pandemic is frustrating at least friends and family members are not our dying for a man-made issue and senseless hatred. All of the stories I heard about Brandeis back in the day were truly incredible and it could be interesting for Brandeis to set up a program to capture the stories, memories, and songs from these early graduates to benefit the future ones.

Final Report from Rebecah Kennedy '22

The Alumni Outreach Program was an experience like no other. The experiences and memories that were shared with me is something that I will cherish for a long time. When talking with many alumni our conversations started with their experience in quarantine. Almost all the alumni that I had conversations with were doing well in quarantine and keeping busy but still acknowledged that it was boring sometimes. It was interesting to see how our experiences during isolation were similar despite the age difference. Isolation became a time for more reading and as well as connecting with people digitally (through zoom class or zoom meeting with friends).

Once we talked about how they are holding up in quarantine our conversation transitioned to their Brandeis experience. Many alumni were so willing to talk about the experience that they had at Brandeis. Starting from their major and the classes that they took. One common thread through most of the conversations that I had were that they both loved the professors that Brandeis employed as well as the fact that they got a well-round education. This was something that I felt like I related to the most because even though I talked with alumni with differing major the common thread was that Brandeis has always and continues to hire outstanding professors. I also learned that they really enjoyed the speakers that Brandeis brought to campus when they were students. This was not something I could entirely relate to because I had been so busy with school and extracurricular activities that I have not really attend a Brandeis talk, but it was eye opening to hear about their experience.

Conversations flowed so easy that we went from Brandeis to what they did post-grad. Whether they went into the field that they studied or took a different path two things were reiterated through every conversation. The first thing is that Brandeis prepared them to take on the world regardless what they majored in. The second thing being that there is no one set path and that I should let life guide me. This is advice that I got over and over again that I have started to implement into my daily life.

Our conversations typically wrapped up with them thanking Brandeis for reaching out especially during this time but also with me thanking them for sharing and talking with me. I don't think it was something that they would have expected Brandeis to do and I think they were grateful to talk with someone who they can relate to.

“The most important political office is that of the private citizen.”

Justice Louis D. Brandeis

The Louis D. Brandeis Legacy Fund for Social Justice supports Brandeis students, enhances campus life and promotes the issues of social justice that the former U.S. Supreme Court justice championed throughout his life.

Since its establishment in 2006, the Legacy Fund has sponsored a series of initiatives designed to help students, enrich the university community, and address social justice concerns on and off campus.

The Legacy Fund was founded by Jules Bernstein '57, and is funded in part by Mr. Bernstein and his wife, Linda Lipsett.

Special gratitude to the Legacy Fund Advisory Committee:

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