

Kay Cutler

"Come, let us reason together—Isaiah 1:18" is displayed prominently in the living room of the Lawrence Cutler family and guided an active, loving group of people in the boisterous city of Bangor. Dr. Lawrence Cutler served on the Board of Education and participated in a drama group in addition to serving as chairman of the board of the University of Maine in Orono.

His friends came with service for Community Chest and support of the Little Theater. Meanwhile he became chief of medicine at Eastern Medical Hospital. It was his wife, Kay Cutler, I came to interview August 5, 1983, as part of a study of pioneer Jews in Maine. She is about 5' 8" tall, gracefully slender, gracious, and cooperative.

Her father, Harry Epstein, came to America when he was thirteen years old, after his bar mitzvah, from Dachihutz, Russia, in 1880, when the Jewish community was already established in Bangor. Kay could never find this town on any map and was not sure it existed until she saw it in Kazan's *Walker in the City*. Her mother, Ida Goldsmith, came as an infant from a village near Vilna about 1890. Kay's maternal grandmother and great-grandmother moved to Bangor after her grandfather was killed in a mill accident. The grandmother, pregnant and mother of five children, was living on a farm near Old Town. To support the family she opened a crockery shop in Bangor and brought her mother to help with the children. Kay's mother attended public school until

she was ten years old and then went to work. She was very attractive and stylishly dressed after she learned to sew clothes. She was a salesperson in a dress shop in her teens.

Kay's father came to Bangor to live with a married brother, Hyman Epstein, though they had never seen each other before. He was sent out to peddle almost immediately without the knowledge of English or experience in trade. He must have been an appealing lad because he said, "People were very nice to me." The Peavey family was especially "nice" since they taught him to speak English. The grandmother invited him to eat with the family. The table had been set after the preceding meal, plates upside down, as was the custom in Maine. Since Harry had never seen overturned plates before, he tried to help himself by dumping the stew on the shallow side. This led to his most embarrassing experience. He never forgot it and relived it as he told his children. The Peaveys (inventor of the Peavey tool that lumbermen use to move logs in the water) taught Harry to read and write English. He walked all over the eastern part of Maine, and people looked for him to supply pins, needles, bobbins, ribbon, tape measures, and other notions. In his teens he acquired a horse and wagon. Later he traveled by train. In those days, trains connected Bangor, Old Town, Belfast, Bar Harbor, Portland, as well as Augusta.

Harry was accepted and cared for mainly by his brother's mother-in-law (Bubbe Cohen), who lived with his family. It was customary for generations to live in the same household, to support the aged, to care for the children, to assist with cooking and cleaning—even to run a business, but Harry came home only once a week or when he finished a route. Harry graduated to wholesale dry goods and was quite successful until 1934 when the Depression really hit Maine. In desperation the business was liquidated. Since he had a reputation for honesty and dependability, he was invited to become a partner in a wholesale candy firm. This he enjoyed and earned a small income for the rest of his working life. He retired in 1970.

Kay was the oldest of Harry's three daughters. The girls were similar in size and taste so that in high school they exchanged clothes and looked well dressed wherever they went. They attended public schools, Kay explained, because it was assumed that Jews would not be accepted in the private school. Everyone Kay knew went to public school. There was some anti-Semitism there among the pupils but not the faculty. No one paid attention

to the occasional epithet "Sheeney"—Jewish children were brought up to expect this. Kay remembers her teachers as warm, supportive people.

Kay was the first of her Jewish friends to go to Wellesley College; it was 1930. The depression came to Maine in 1931, so when her sister was ready for college, the family was hard-pressed. Kay volunteered to come home and attend the University of Maine, but her father rejected that solution. Her second sister was sent to college later. Both sisters are social workers; Geneva Cutler married a brother of Lawrence, and Lucille was a supervisor at Jewish Family Service in Philadelphia.

When Kay graduated in 1935, Maine was in the throes of the Depression. She was working for the Farm and Home Loan Corporation for fifteen dollars per week when friends from the economics department of Wellesley invited her to assume an assistantship in pursuit of a master's degree in economics. She worked in New York for a while and then came back to Bangor to get married. Soon Lawrence (as a member of the National Guard) was called to serve, before the U. S. was involved in World War II. Kay followed him to Mississippi and Alabama, working at camps. She also worked for the National Labor Board until he was shipped to the Philippines, New Guinea, New Zealand, Guadalcanal, etc. While he was serving in the Pacific, Kay worked in Washington, D.C. and lived with her sister Geneva, a probation officer. Her husband, stationed in New Guinea, wrote home about "huge psychiatric casualties." Lawrence, an internist, shared a tent with the psychiatrist to help him restore some of the division. Kay sent him a whole library from Brentanos in Washington, D.C. on Freud and psychiatry. He served five years, and when Kay and Lawrence returned to Bangor they found life completely different there.

Before he was commissioned, all their friends were Jews. Social life flourished in the synagogue, family, and profession. After the war they acquired friends among non-Jews, socially and in community activities. The community was ready for change. Many professional men married non-Jews, but they wanted Jewish education for their children. The two synagogues were Orthodox and would not admit the children unless the mothers converted. Kay supported Dr. Sidney Block, a rheumatologist, when he organized a Reform temple to assist these families. "People need support, and they need a choice," she said.

In her own family there was some dissension over religious education. Her maternal grandmother advocated it, but her father could see no value in observing the rituals. He joined the synagogue but attended only once a year on High Holidays in September. Kay never participated in a Passover Seder until a college friend took her home for the holidays during her freshman year. Her father, unlike his older brothers, was not active in organizations, especially not the synagogue.

Kay and her sister Geneva translated the minutes of the Ahavas Achim Congregation of Brotherly Love that had been established in 1848 by German Jews. By 1956 most of the members had moved away.

During junior high years Kay attended Beth-El when Meyer Segal (the oldest son of Rabbi Segal of Lewiston) came to lecture on Sunday mornings. Bangor thought he must be a Reform Jew because he said many Orthodox teachings were meaningless. Kay played the piano for the choir. Men and women could sit together at Beth Israel though the rabbi was Orthodox.

Jewish fraternities and sororities were formed in self-defense, but Kay actually did not know how Jews found they were not welcome; she had no idea that the country club was in fact discriminating. Her three children were invited by members of the club, but they were forbidden to go. Veritas was the Jewish answer to discrimination—dances, parties, lectures, and other gatherings were open for all young people, although most who belonged were Jews. Now the country club is open to all who can support it.

Meyer Segal helped to bridge the gap between Jews and non-Jews as a teacher and businessman. His group of more-or-less nonobservant Jews met in churches and community centers until 1936 or 1937 and then disintegrated. Segal was the first president of Beth-El, but he also belonged to Beth Israel, where he acted as a catalyst between those who would not change anything and those who wished to use English in part of the service and to discard some of the European rituals. He rewrote the constitution of the congregation with new bylaws that reflected the desires of the younger as well as the older members of the congregation in 1954.

An English-speaking rabbi had been installed in 1949, Rabbi Avraham Friedman, who led the congregation to his version of Conservative. While as traditional as his predecessors in fundamentals, he tended to enhance the service for modern Jews.

Kay felt he was closer to the emotional and religious needs of his congregation than previous rabbis. His was the longest service in the synagogue.

When I asked Kay about the refusal of the rabbi to perform the bar mitzvah ceremony for William Cohen, Secretary of Defense under President Clinton, she was angry about the vilification of Rabbi Friedman over this story. She has "enormous admiration for the rabbi." Although "Billy" did attend Hebrew School, she explained, his mother was an Episcopalian and did not convert to Judaism. His father, a baker, was outraged when the ritual called for a drop of blood from "Billy" and refused to go through with the ceremony. Kay believes no one in the congregation would have objected if he were bar mitzvahed without the drop of blood. This led to membership in the Unitarian Church for the senator but did not alienate him from his Jewish family.

Kay has three sons. Eliot is a lawyer in Washington, D.C. Josh is a cardiologist in Washington, D.C., and Joel is an internist. While she was raising these bright boys, she was also concerned with the welfare of the mentally ill in Bangor. As president of the Bangor-Brewer Community Council, she chaired a luncheon at the Penobscot Country Club for a speech by Virginia psychologist William Harland Kelly on mental health. He indicated how community groups in attendance, including the Junior League, could cooperate. The next day, May 3, 1956, Kay conducted the Community Council meeting in conjunction with the mental health conference where Dr. Kelly said, "Bangor is not sick, but ailing. Bangor residents are interested in the self and not the community. The shoe is not pinching his or her toe," when school administrators reported 400 children needed psychiatric care. Bangor police reported one-third of all juvenile delinquents needed psychiatric care as well. Kay was appointed to the state Committee on Mental Health and Corrections by Governor James B. Longley and reported to the 108th legislature.

Kay chaired a group that studied the Jewish Community Center from 1949 to 1951 after the center had been in existence for some time. The report showing the center had outlived its usefulness was a good report, but she was not elected to the board. She served on many boards and was a member of Hadassah, a charitable organization. In addition, she helped to establish a safe house for battered women, raising money from men who belonged to various houses of worship. I asked Kay

what made it possible for her to help change Bangor. She replied, "When the world is ready to listen to what you have to say, it is much easier to accomplish change."

Now that she has had time to think about her "career," Kay wonders if her sisters were more productive in professional jobs than she was doing volunteer work. "It was frustrating to work for money—to be responsible to someone else. I could create as a volunteer. A more structured program might have been more satisfactory, but I'm not complaining. I had a great time."