

Alfred Benjamin

Philanthropist
1859-1923

by Dory DeAngelo

A mourner waiting outside of Temple B’Nai Jehudah after Alfred Benjamin’s funeral said, “I would rather be Alfred Benjamin than anyone I know.”

Born in Quebec, Alfred Benjamin and his family moved to Leavenworth, Kansas, where he began working as a clerk at the Abernathy Furniture Company. In 1880, the company opened a branch store in Kansas City and the family moved here, where Benjamin soon became first vice-president of the company.

Benjamin became president of the United Jewish Charities in 1905. The growing needs of Kansas City’s poor prompted him to persuade the charity to open The Jewish Educational Institute at 17th and Locust Streets in 1906. By 1909, the Institute moved to larger facilities on Admiral Boulevard. The Institute was for all poor, regardless of race or religion. A social worker, the first in Kansas City, was hired to develop self-help and skills programs to enable the needy to find work. These programs focused on education, teaching English, recreation, and classes in dancing, singing, and art. Much of the funding for these programs came from Benjamin himself. It was rumored that he gave as much as 50 percent of his annual income to charities, but he was also known as a good fundraiser.

Benjamin saw a growing need for health care for the poor and pledged the funds for a medical dispensary to be built and staffed next to the Institute. Civic leaders who saw the benefits of his work refused his money and raised enough to build the medical facility, naming it The Alfred Benjamin Dispensary.

A Catholic priest and a rabbi spoke at Benjamin’s funeral in 1923. Hundreds of people, rich and the poor, attended. Many tributes were paid and one admirer summed up his life by saying, “He was happy in giving.” A memorial statue to Benjamin was funded by his admirers and placed in Swope Park.

Sources

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