

# THE DETROIT JEWISH NEWS



Kintsugi Village co-founders Hamsa Yaqo, left, and Paul Spiegelman at the early childhood education center at Kintsugi Village on Saturday.

## Paul Spiegelman's Kintsugi Village Brings a Holistic Vision to Detroit's Corktown

Kintsugi Village opens in Detroit's Corktown, blending preschool, art, and urban gardens in a new model for holistic community building.

BY SHARI COHEN

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Kintsugi is a Japanese ceramic technique of repairing broken pottery with a gold-infused glaze that makes the piece stronger and more beautiful than it was initially. Spiegelman says it was a “powerful metaphor for life” for himself and Kintsugi’s co-founder Hamsa Yaqo, a Chaldean immigrant who has lived in Detroit since 1992. The two had worked together for years while Yaqo was executive director of Small Giants, a business organization established by Spiegelman.

Spiegelman had visited and enjoyed Detroit since Small Giants began holding its annual summits here in 2017.

“The entrepreneurs who attended were so taken by Detroit that the Summit has remained here ever since. Attendees spoke about the energy and vibe Downtown, the pace of new development, the entrepreneurial spirit and the incredible venues,” he says.

For Spiegelman, Detroit seemed like a logical new home. “Detroit adopted me, and I adopted Detroit. I’m a city guy,” he said. Spiegelman, 67, lives Downtown and enjoys its walkability, proximity of sports venues and its food scene.

Spiegelman’s life was in transition at the time of his move. He had sold his business, transferred leadership of Small Giants and experienced some personal challenges.

He felt it was time to find a new purpose. “You move from the building stage to the giving-back stage. We sold the company in 2012. Nonprofit work gives me purpose.”

Yaqo says that Spiegelman “was ready to give back and is a very generous person.”

### Planning a Holistic Community

Yaqo, who was executive director of Small Giants, also was seeking a new challenge. Together, sitting at the Detroit Institute of Arts, they developed a plan for a holistic neighborhood hub in Detroit, offering indoor and outdoor educational programs for children and adults that would foster creativity and a strong community.





Rendering of completed garden adjacent to the Kintsugi building

“We could immediately see how it could impact our neighbors, especially kids,” Yaqo said. It was an ambitious idea but one that these two pragmatic idealists turned into reality in less than two years.

They sought a site that could be renovated rather than building a new one, reflecting their commitment to Detroit’s history and the value of restoration —perhaps a reference to the Kintsugi technique. Various properties were considered and St. Vincent Middle School at 2020 14th St. in Corktown was chosen as a good fit, especially because there was an adjacent lot for outdoor programs. The school closed in 2010, and the building had been vacant for several years when it was purchased by Kintsugi Village, which had been incorporated as a 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation.

Spiegelman and Yaqo began meeting regularly with nearby neighborhood organizations, block clubs and other Detroit nonprofits to explore what residents wanted in a community center. During the same time, an architectural firm and contractor were chosen. Architectural plans were developed by Newmann/Smith Architecture, and Sachse Construction began

the job of gutting and rebuilding the 40,000-square-foot structure.

From the beginning, early childhood education was a focus, as local residents said this was much needed. “We learned about Reggio-Emilia [originating in a town in Italy], how it was child-led and focused on several key pillars, including art, food, nature and family. That led to the ultimate vision of our Village, which was to bring these pillars to life on one campus, integrating the school with our art program, culinary kitchen and outdoor community garden,” Spiegelman said. “Everything works together.”

Kintsugi Village’s early childhood education center was the first part of the campus to be completed. It features ample open space, extensive natural light, appealing furniture and play areas, and a fenced playground. A garden will be planted in the adjacent outdoor area so that students can learn how produce is grown and then cooked in Kintsugi’s third-floor kitchen. Fees for the preschool are based on a sliding scale with preference given to lower-income neighborhood residents.

The Kintsugi hub will also include an art incubator — studio space for artists, classes and an art residency as



Kintsugi Village co-founders Paul Spiegelman and Hamsa Yaqo in front of the building during construction

well as a gallery. The co-founders want to encourage Detroit artists to remain in the city; creativity is part of their vision for Kintsugi.

In addition, the second and third floors will offer meeting, retreat,





Paul Spiegelman and Hamsa Yago during community planting of the urban forest.



Children's play area in the Early Education Childhood Center.

and cooking and maker spaces. The third (top floor) has a roof deck that overlooks Michigan Central, making it an appealing event venue that will generate revenue for Kintsugi operations. Construction is expected to be completed in early 2026.

### From Dream to Reality

On Sept. 20, 100 volunteers came to help plant bushes and trees in Kintsugi's pocket forest, inspired by SUGi, an international organization that fosters biodiversity by creating small forests, usually in cities. The Greening of Detroit, Bright Side Collective, Life Time Fitness Foundation and other organizations provided gardening expertise, supplies, funds and volunteers. Helping to fulfill the village's goal of a healthy, holistic community, the mini-forest, gardens as well as walking paths, grassy areas and seating, will provide a peaceful, green retreat for the neighborhood.

At the village's Oct. 10 Grand Opening, about 500 adults and children explored the village, inside and out, enjoyed food from local restaurants, a DJ set, children's activities, and a brief program including local city and county officials, community representatives and a Ford executive from nearby Michigan Central. Spiegelman moved among the upbeat crowd, friendly and informal, greeting and often hugging people he knew, helping set up a table, and arranging the official ribbon.

Speakers included a local government official and Ford executive who mentioned that they had chosen the Kintsugi Village preschool for their own children. The first day of school was Oct. 13.

Fees from the preschool, other classes and rental spaces will assist Kintsugi Village in becoming self-sustaining. A three-year capital campaign is under way. Spiegelman assisted in acquiring initial funding.

"We were very happy with the feedback from the opening and very happy that the school actually opened! Seeing the kids gave us a great deal of satisfaction. But mostly, it's right back to work to continue with construction, make any necessary tweaks to the school and start to program the rest of the building [art program, culinary program, urban garden program]," Spiegelman said.

### About Paul Spiegelman

Spiegelman was born in Los Angeles where he had a Jewish upbringing. He graduated from UCLA and earned a law degree from Southwestern Law School. Spiegelman practiced law briefly and then started a business with his two brothers — connecting consumers with medical providers by phone.

The Spiegelman brothers created a positive workplace that attracted and retained employees — not the usual call center environment. Their compa-



Paul Spiegelman

ny — BerylHealth — expanded, acquiring a contract with a large healthcare company in Texas.

The company grew to almost \$40 million in annual revenues with 400 employees and was sold to Stericycle, a public company. Spiegelman served as Stericycle's chief culture officer for five years. In addition, he founded The Beryl Institute, a leadership community devoted to the patient experience in healthcare and the Small Giants Community.

Paul Spiegelman became a business thought leader who demonstrated that creating a great workplace is not only the right thing but also a way to boost profitability and sustainability. He is a popular speaker, author and podcaster. His first book was *Why Is Everyone Smiling*; he later wrote two other books, including a *New York Times* bestseller.