

# Symbolic (and filmed) Sukkot Journey

By Janet Arnold

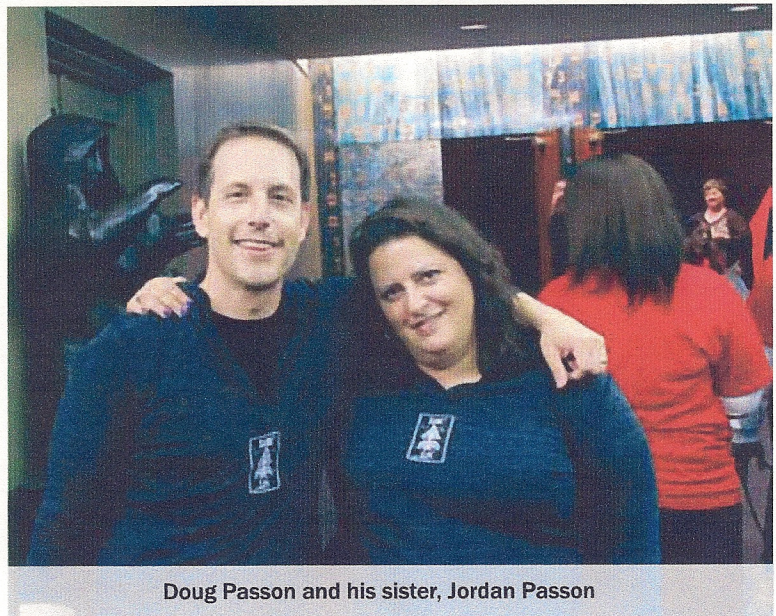
**T**he short answer to “What is Sukkot?” is “It’s the fall harvest holiday.” But it’s much more than that. Sukkot is symbolic of the Jewish journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. A 40-year journey of wandering, but also one of learning, growing, maturing and understanding. If one understands the geography involved, it’s easy to see the trip didn’t have to take that long – that is, if they walked in a straight line. But the Jewish people needed time to sort out who they were, what they believed in. They needed to learn to become a spiritual people, a community bonded together in their beliefs. They needed to accept that everyone is equal, that everyone has ability and contributes to the whole. The temporary shelter or sukkah reminded them and us that life is fragile and transitory – and that we must live for the moment.

Doug Passon discovered the depth of Sukkot during his time as a student in the Wexner Heritage Program, a two-year learning program whose mission is “to expand the vision of Jewish volunteer leaders, deepen their Jewish knowledge and confidence, and inspire them to exercise transformative leadership in the Jewish community.” He was one of about 20 individuals in the greater Phoenix area to participate in this extensive educational program.

Doug, an attorney with the federal public defender’s office, is grateful for the opportunity to have studied through the Wexner Program. He was chosen as an up-and-coming young leader in the Jewish community and is living up to the program’s high aspirations in both his vocation and avocations. He believes his work as a public defender is Jewish to its core. “Judaism teaches us to seek justice, to reach out to help our fellow man, to welcome the stranger. That’s the work I do on a daily basis, particularly with immigration issues,” he says.

In addition to his work, another of Doug’s passions is making movies. He debated going to film school, but his parents nudged him in the direction of law school, and he knew a law degree would add stability to his future. However, he has integrated film into his practice and has been invited to show other public defenders how to use film to strengthen their defense strategies. “Oftentimes, words just don’t tell the whole story,” Doug explains. “About eight years ago I put together a five to 10 minute documentary to use at a client’s sentencing, showing much more about his life and circumstances than could be simply told. It was very successful and now others are using the same technique.”

Doug grew up in Minnesota and Indiana and attended a Jewish camp where his best friend was Dan Nichols. Dan’s



Doug Passon and his sister, Jordan Passon

family converted to Judaism when he was 9, and he treasured his camp experiences as ones that helped him to absorb all he could about what it meant to be Jewish. Both musicians, Doug and Dan bonded over Jewish camp music.

Dan went on to earn a degree in vocal performance and formed the Jewish rock band Eighteen in 1995. Each of the band’s eight full-length studio albums received critical acclaim. At a reunion of camp friends in 2010, Dan shared an exciting project. He had received a grant to put together a musical journey through the Deep South during Sukkot. The only stipulation was that he seek out small communities that probably couldn’t afford an outdoor concert.

Would Doug like to film the journey? This would be a trip through the Deep South ending at their beloved “summer home” at Goldman Union Camp. It would be their own version of the passage to the “Promised Land.”

Doug didn’t need to be asked twice.

With the OK from his job and the support of his family – wife, Rachel, and sons, Nathaniel and Dillon – Doug recruited a crew from students he had met in film classes at Scottsdale Community College.

The resulting documentary, “The Road to Eden: Rock and Roll Sukkot,” chronicles the tour of 11 performances in 10 days. More than simply temporary stops on a concert tour, the communities welcomed the musicians as members of their own. Perhaps most moving is a visit to New Orleans, where an Orthodox synagogue and Reform temple are shown uniting, after damage from Hurricane Katrina, to share land so both may flourish.

“The Road to Eden: Rock and Roll Sukkot” premieres at the Valley of the Sun Jewish Community Center Sept. 21. The evening will begin with a Havdallah service. Dan Nichols and Eighteen will perform a live concert, thanks to support from Congregation Beth Israel. The JCC and Doug’s congregation, Or Chadash, are also providing support. The film was produced by Doug’s sister, Jordan Passon. They raised money from family and friends and through Indiegogo, a crowdfunding platform, but they need additional funding. To participate, visit [roadtoedentour.com](http://roadtoedentour.com). ■

*For more information on Dan Nichols and Eighteen, go to [jewishrock.com](http://jewishrock.com).*