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Maine Jewish Museum event celebrates cultures – across a dinner table

Author Nhi Aronheim will be sharing her story over a Vietnamese-Jewish fusion meal at Maine Jewish Museum on Thursday

Community: **Portland**

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Chloe Swedberg
Staff Writer

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Author Nhi Aronheim, who is from Vietnam and now based in the Denver area, raised her children around the dinner table.

"I think food brings people together. It's a bond," said Aronheim.

Nhi Aronheim (photo courtesy of Nhi Aronheim)

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Now, Aronheim is coming to Portland this week to share her story over peanut noodle kugel and mango crumble bars.

On Thursday, the Maine Jewish Museum is hosting "At the Table with Author Nhi Aronheim: A Vietnamese–Jewish Fusion Dinner." The event at 6 p.m. will consist of a dialogue with Aronheim about her experience fleeing Vietnam alone at 12 years old in search of the American Dream.

Aronheim, who later converted to Judaism, shares her experiences across Vietnamese and Jewish culture in her book "Soles of a Survivor: A Memoir." Museum executive director and former restaurateur Dawn LaRochelle will be preparing each dish.

The same day, the museum will hold a free "Lunch, Listen, and Learn" brown-bag talk at noon. Guests should bring their own vegetarian lunch with them. Books will be available for purchase and signing at both events.

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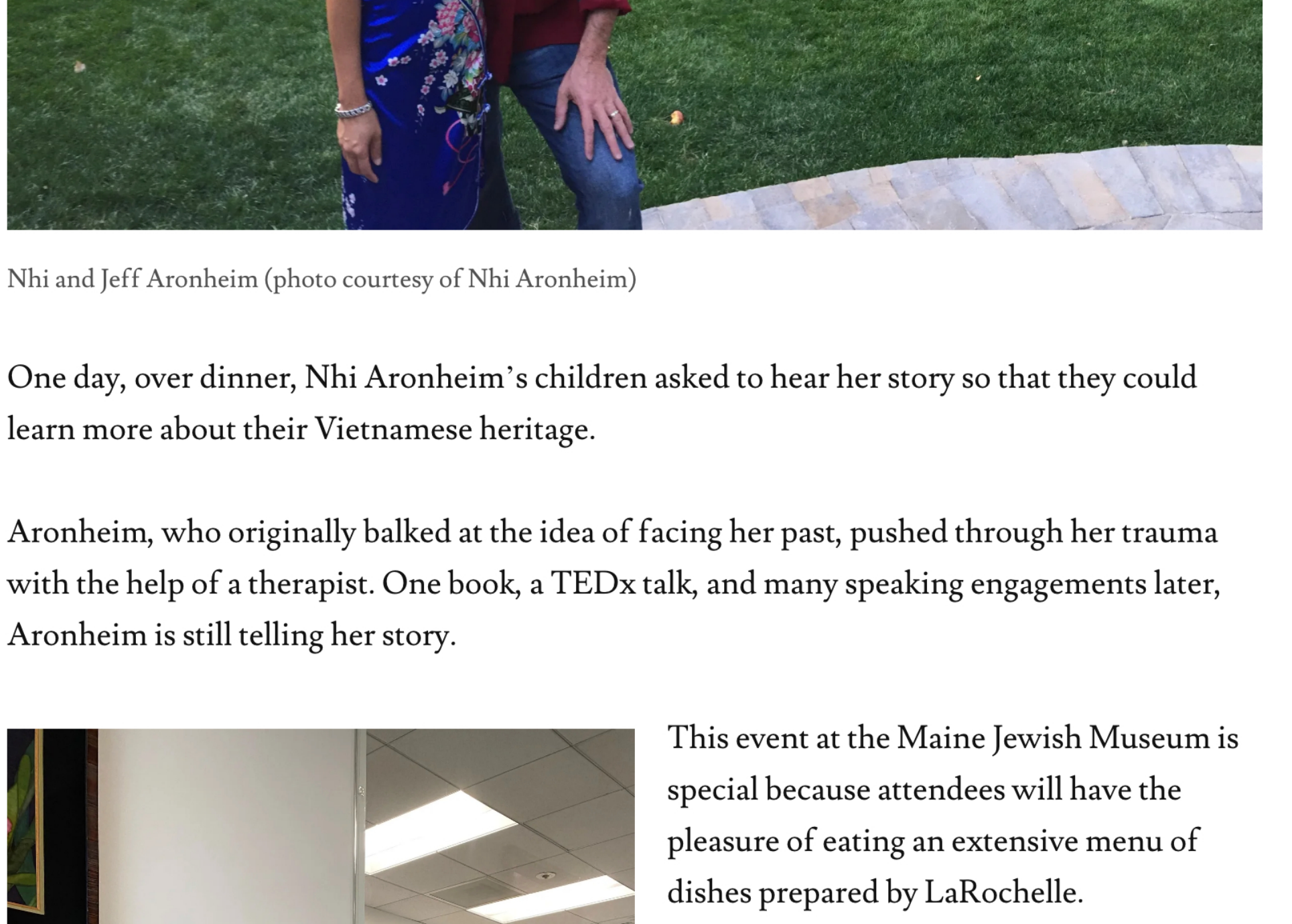
Attendees at Aronheim's events can expect to hear the story of how her idyllic life at an estate in Vietnam became a nightmare under the communist regime. Her father, a physician who worked with the American military, was quickly targeted and her family's home searched and torn apart. After trekking through the jungles of Cambodia with a group of strangers, through refugee camps in Thailand, and an orphanage where she waited two years to qualify for refugee status, Aronheim finally made it to the U.S. and was raised by a Christian family.

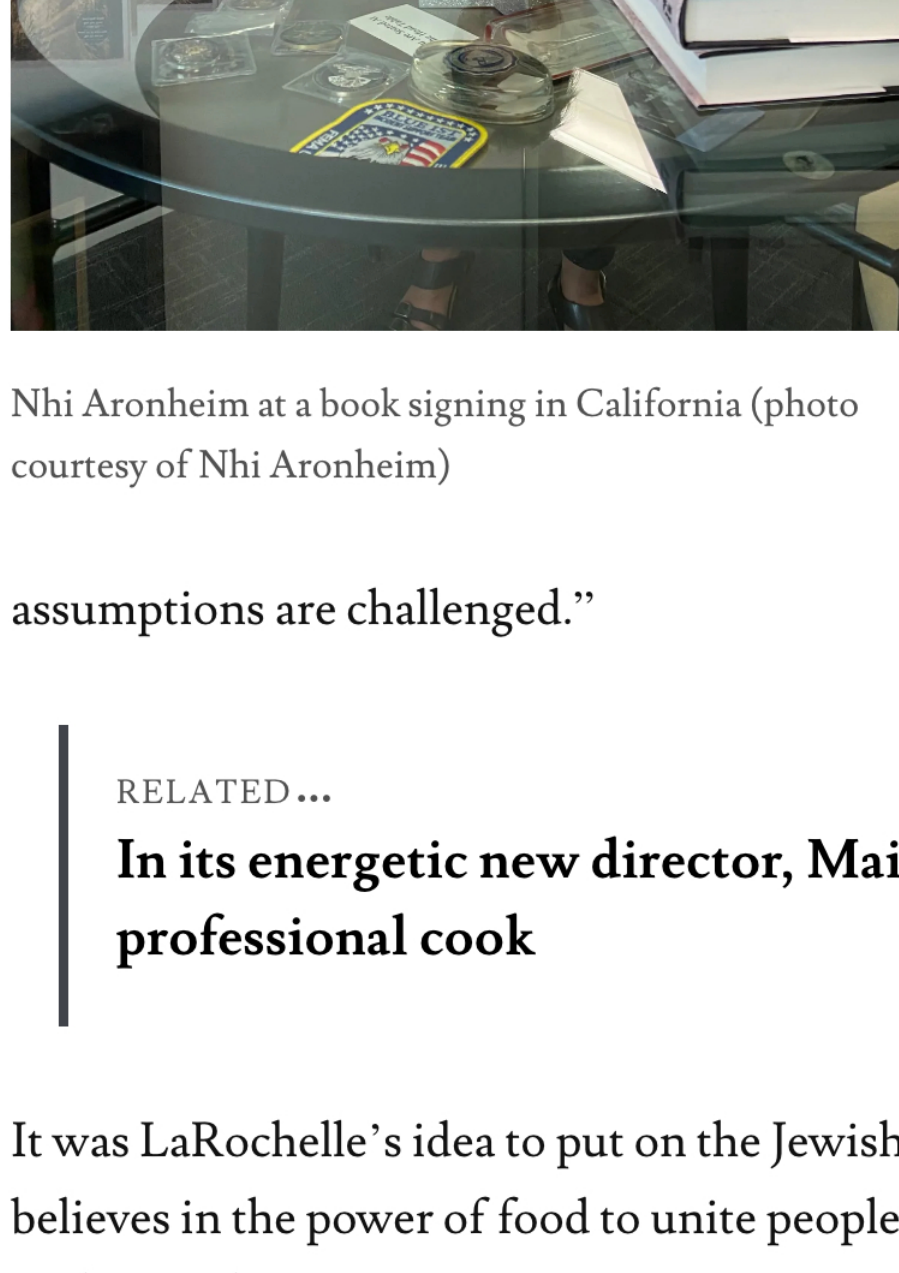
Though she didn't plan to convert to Judaism, Aronheim found that she shared many of the same values with her husband, Jeff Aronheim, who is Jewish, and decided to take that next step four years later. The couple raised their kids with Vietnamese and Jewish traditions.



Nhi and Jeff Aronheim (photo courtesy of Nhi Aronheim)

One day, over dinner, Nhi Aronheim's children asked to hear her story so that they could learn more about their Vietnamese heritage.

Aronheim, who originally balked at the idea of facing her past, pushed through her trauma with the help of a therapist. One book, a TEDx talk, and many speaking engagements later, Aronheim is still telling her story.



Nhi Aronheim at a book signing in California (photo courtesy of Nhi Aronheim)

This event at the Maine Jewish Museum is special because attendees will have the pleasure of eating an extensive menu of dishes prepared by LaRochelle.

LaRochelle, who has worked at the Maine Jewish Museum for four years, is excited about the event, which offers her an opportunity to not only return to her roots as a former restaurateur and caterer, but also unite seemingly disparate cultures, Vietnamese and Jewish.

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"Jewish experience does not exist in isolation," said LaRochelle. "And the most interesting stories often emerge at the intersections where cultures meet, where traditions influence each other, and where assumptions are challenged."

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It was LaRochelle's idea to put on the Jewish-Vietnamese dinner with Aronheim because she believes in the power of food to unite people and create shared experiences and understanding.

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It was LaRochelle's idea to put on the Jewish-Vietnamese dinner with Aronheim because she believes in the power of food to unite people and create shared experiences and understanding.

"Food tells us where people come from, what they've carried with them, and how they've built their lives in new places," said LaRochelle.

The Maine Jewish Museum is not the only Jewish organization in Maine seeking to connect Judaism with other cultures. Another cross-cultural bridge builder in Portland is Zach Schwartz, who is Taiwanese and Jewish, and works as the director of the Jewish Community Relations Council at the Jewish Community Alliance.

"I'm really glad that Dawn is putting on this event because I think it provides a space for what Dawn calls the '&,' the ampersand identity, which shows that people can be Jewish and Asian and that, you know, people like that can be celebrated and tell their stories," said Schwartz.

VIETNAMESE HUMMUS

The recipe was developed by Dawn LaRochelle. A silky hummus infused with ginger, seasoned rice vinegar, Vietnamese chili-garlic sauce, soy sauce, cilantro, and green onion. Familiar, yet entirely unexpected.

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Yield: Approximately 1½ cups

4 cloves garlic, peeled and left whole
1-2 tablespoons neutral oil
Kosher salt, to taste
1 scallion, white and green parts, trimmed and thinly sliced
1 (15-ounce) can chickpeas (garbanzo beans), drained
1-inch piece fresh ginger, peeled and roughly chopped
1 tablespoon soy sauce, plus more to taste
1 tablespoon seasoned rice vinegar, plus more to taste
1 tablespoon Asian toasted sesame oil, plus more to taste
½ – 1 tablespoon Vietnamese chili-garlic sauce, plus more to taste
Water, as needed
Chopped cilantro and toasted sesame seeds, for garnish
Pita, sesame pita chips, rice crackers and/or other crudites, for serving

Roast the garlic cloves on a large sheet of aluminum foil. Drizzle generously with oil (1-2 tablespoons) and season with kosher salt.

Fold the edges of the foil inward and scrunch the top to create a tight, sealed "hobo pack" or pouch so the steam and juices don't escape.

Place the pouch on a baking sheet and bake at 375 °F for 30 – 40 minutes. The garlic is done when the cloves are golden brown and easily pierced with a fork.

Cool to room temperature.

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For the Base

Reserve about 1 tablespoon of the sliced scallion greens for garnish.

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Reserve about 1 tablespoon of the sliced scallion greens for garnish.

Place the chickpeas, roasted garlic, remaining scallions and ginger in a food processor. Process until the mixture forms a smooth paste.

Add the soy sauce, rice vinegar, sesame oil and Vietnamese chili garlic sauce.

Pulse several times, adding a few tablespoons of water as needed until the hummus is smooth and creamy.

Taste and adjust the seasoning. Add additional soy sauce, rice vinegar, or sesame oil as until the mixture forms a smooth paste.

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Pulse several times, adding a few tablespoons of water as needed until the hummus is smooth and creamy.

Taste and adjust the seasoning. Add additional soy sauce, rice vinegar, or sesame oil as desired. You may also want to add a pinch of kosher salt.

Transfer to a serving bowl and sprinkle with the cilantro, sesame seeds and reserved scallion greens.

Serve with pita, sesame pita chips, rice crackers and/or crudites.

IF YOU GO

"At the Table with Author Nhi Aronheim: A Vietnamese–Jewish Fusion Dinner" at 6 p.m. on Thursday at the Maine Jewish Museum. 267 Congress Street, Portland. Tickets are $71. For more, go to mainejewishmuseum.org

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Chloe Swedberg Staff Writer

Chloe Swedberg, a graduate of Bowdoin College, is pursuing a master of journalism degree from the University of California, Berkeley. She is working with the Press Herald's features team. More by Chloe Swedberg

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