

New Jersey Jewish Teens Lend Hands and Hearts

JENNIFER MARCUS BARBARA

While their peers may look forward to relaxing on a beach on their next school vacation, a committed group of local high school students are preparing to remove flood-soaked family heirlooms from a stranger's home. These Jewish teens are traveling to communities devastated by natural disasters as part of the NCSY New Jersey Region's Leadership Mission.

Formerly known as the National Conference of Synagogue Youth, **NCSY** was founded by the Orthodox Union in 1954 to provide Jewish teens with an opportunity to connect to their Jewish roots. The NCSY operates across the U.S., Chile, and Israel and reaches 35,000 Jewish teens each year.

NJ NCSY, headquartered in Teaneck, has been running the Leadership Mission for three years. The more than 130 high school students (both members and non-members) who have gone on these missions come from yeshiva and public schools. "It's very Jewish to lend a helping hand," says Rabbi Ethan Katz, assistant regional director of NJ NCSY. "That's our number one motive—teaching kids their responsibility to fellow human beings."

Seeing Firsthand

Many of these trips have been coordinated with NECHAMA: Jewish Response to Disaster, an immediate response organization that provides direct support to communities recovering from natural disasters. NJ NCSY also works with long-term agencies like Habitat for Humanity. "We were down in Galveston, Texas, a week after Hurricane Ike hit," says Rabbi Katz, who leads the missions. "All the motels had been booked with people who lost their homes. We were given the task of helping to clean out homes that had been damaged beyond repair. Imagine, just days earlier a family lived there, and now that family was one of the many we saw sleeping in the parking lots. It was an extremely emotional trip."

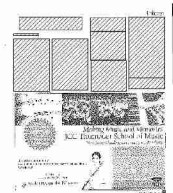
Ely Shestack of Bergenfield, then a sophomore at the Torah Academy of Bergen County, was on the Texas trip. "We felt part of a larger global community," Shestack says. "It was an amazing feeling to walk away at the end of each day seeing what we had accomplished."

In February, 2009, students spent time building and repairing houses in New Orleans with Habitat for Humanity, a strong presence in the region since Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005. Other NJ NCSY projects there included visiting a residence for seniors, running educational programs at a local Jewish day school, and spending Shabbat at a synagogue, helping to make the *minyan*. The group has also traveled to upstate New York to rebuild homes in downtown Buffalo with Habitat for Humanity.

Philip Katz of Fairlawn, then a sophomore at Northern Highlands Regional High School, traveled to Atlanta in October, 2009, following a flood a few weeks earlier. The 15 students on the mission were responsible for cleaning out rooms, removing flooring, and dismantling dry-wall. "As a result of our efforts, not only were we able to feel enormously positive for helping complete strangers with their homes, but we also received the opportunity to be ambassadors for the Jewish people," he says.

Held to a Higher Standard

Rabbi Katz believes that the impact of what these teens do over a few days will last for many years. "Before we go on these trips, we teach the kids an elevator pitch about who they are and what they are doing," he says. "When 30 kids walk into a Wal-Mart in New Orleans wearing yarmuikes, they are going to be asked questions." NJ NCSY teaches the students to explain that they are Orthodox Jews who have come to this community to work with an established agency. "We want our kids to explain that their youth organization believes it's important to help out, to do more than just learn about a disaster on the news. We also



remind our students that, when they go on these missions, they are representing not only themselves, but the Jewish

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faith, and they must be on their very best behavior. They are being held to a higher standard.”

NJ NCSY is planning four Leadership Missions this year. Participants are chosen by their schools based on scholastics, character development, leadership potential, and an essay they write about *tikkun olam* (making the world a better place) or *chesed* (acts of loving kindness). NJ NCSY holds three after-school sessions to prepare the

students for the trip. During missions, students are given journals, and debriefing sessions are held each day to help the teenagers cope with the intensity of their experience. Following the trip, the students create a presentation to deliver to their schools.

Like other first responders, Rabbi Katz and his students are prepared to go on the road when calamity occurs. He hopes to soon have a disaster-response rotation of students in which teams of trained teens would be able to leave within a few days of a disaster.