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# Bergen County Students Work in New Orleans for Habitat

THURSDAY, 29 JANUARY 2015 12:07 BY ZACHARY SCHRIEBER



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Taking 10 teenagers to New Orleans for New Year's may not seem like the best idea, but for New Jersey NCSY and Bergen County High School for Jewish Studies, a local Sunday school program for public school students, it was the perfect way to spend winter break.



NCSY and BCHSJS students after working with Habitat for Humanity. Zachary Schriber

"It was a great opportunity to use my Judaism to experience culture, meet new people, and make the world a better place," said Camryn Bolkin, a sophomore at Tenafly High School.

The program, led by Avital Moss, a teacher at BCHSJS and a coordinator at NCSY, was sponsored by Steve and Roz Flatow in memory of their daughter Alisa, who was killed in a 1995 terrorist attack in Israel. "When tragedy strikes, you have to ask why?" said Steve. "The best memorial for her is to help kids meet other kids and work on social justice missions."

Rabbi Ethan Katz, New Jersey NCSY Regional Director, echoed the sentiment. "These missions are a great opportunity for our teens to learn firsthand the Torah values of how to be a light unto other nations through cheessed and tikkun olam," he said. "NJ NCSY is honored to be partnering with the Flatows to keep Alisa's memory alive."

The program first began with a drive through New Orleans suburbs, working with the organization Green Light New Orleans, a program founded in 2006 by Andreas Hoffmann, a Jewish ex-musician from Switzerland. He originally sought to offset his own carbon emissions while on tour by changing lightbulbs from inefficient incandescent to new CFLs, while at the same time helping to "assist in the sustainable rebuilding of New Orleans." Now the program has become widespread in the New Orleans area and Hoffmann is working on a project to educate homeowners about local backyard gardening. For the average homeowner, the lifetime savings from the simple act of changing light bulbs equates to thousands of tons of carbon removed from the atmosphere and hundreds of dollars off electrical bills.

"Seeing the looks on the homeowners faces when we told them how much money they were saving was extremely rewarding," said Miranda Alper, a senior at Fair Lawn High School. "We made the world a little brighter, one lightbulb at a time."

The next two days were dedicated to working with Habitat for Humanity, helping to build a house in a different New Orleans suburb. The teens painted the exterior of the entire house, as well as helped to nail in some sections of the insulation and set the front staircase. Habitat for Humanity asks that the recipient of the house contribute a significant number of work hours to the project, and the students were excited to meet, and paint with, the beneficiary of their hard work.

"Volunteering with Habitat for Humanity was one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever been a part of," said Julia Baer, also a senior at Fair Lawn High. "Being able to work alongside the homeowner allowed us to see firsthand how much of an impact we were making."

The trip climaxed with a tour of the lower 9th ward, which is still reeling from the total devastation of Hurricane Katrina. There, not only are homes abandoned, but many are still painted with the date that the army first entered the home after Katrina and marked if deceased were found inside. This became the location for a twilight discussion about the relationship between Jewish tradition and social responsibility. As the sun set, the entire group debated ideas about responsibilities, and what it means to be a part of a local community, a broader Jewish family, as well as citizens of the United States.

The trip was not all hard work though. There were a couple of visits to the old French Quarter, and

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beignet breakfasts at the historic Cafe Du Monde.

The message of the trip was not lost on the participants, who recognized that the effort and work they contributed during the three-day mission would have long lasting implications, both on themselves and the local residents. During a lunch break while working with Habitat for Humanity, one teen described it succinctly. "We weren't just painting houses" said sophomore David Stack, "we were painting dreams."

By Zachary Schrieber

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