

# Ma'ayanot Students: Mission to Omaha

For the fifth time in as many years, Ma'ayanot, in conjunction with NJ **NCSY**, sent a group of students to participate in a five-day Leadership Training/Service Mission. These missions, subsidized by NJ NCSY, are designed to educate about the importance of *chesed* and *tikkun olam* and to provide opportunities for the students to interact with Jewish communities outside of the metropolitan area.

Five years ago Ma'ayanot students traveled to Minnesota to help repair housing damaged by Red River flooding. In the subsequent three years, students participated in missions to New Orleans to provide assistance to communities still recovering from Hurricane Katrina. This year, 22 sophomores and juniors, Ma'ayanot's largest contingent ever, traveled to Omaha, Nebraska.

Rabbi Ethan Katz, Regional Director of NJ NCSY, worked with Rabbi Zev Prince, Talmud teacher and Director of Religious Programming at Ma'ayanot, to plan the missions, and they, along with NCSY advisors Avital Moss, Sherry Amster, and Rebecca Bari, and Mrs. Yael Weil, Halakha teacher at Ma'ayanot, accompanied the students to Omaha.

The first day of the trip was spent working, primarily drywalling and installing insulation, on a Habitat for Humanity building project aimed at providing low-cost housing for families in need. The Habitat organizer, who had never before worked with an all-female contingent, commented that he was pleasantly surprised at their productivity. Sophomore Dina Jawetz was also pleased with what the group accomplished: "We finished drywalling three rooms, and it is really amazing to be part of an effort that will help people be able to afford a home of their own."

Also meaningful were numerous opportunities to interact with different parts of the Jewish community. For example, on Friday morning students volunteered with children at both the Child Development Center and the Friedel Jewish Day School, singing Shabbat songs and leading lessons on Jewish holidays, and in the afternoon they visited with elderly residents at the Rose Blumkin Jewish Nursing Home. After Shabbat, students chose between visiting and playing

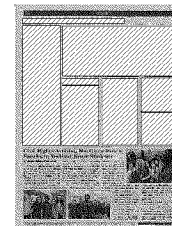
board games with adult Yachad members or, because there is no kosher bakery in Omaha, attending a baking session in the shul kitchen, the products of which were frozen for use at future shul *kiddushim*.

A highlight of the trip, for both the students and members of Congregation Beth Israel, the local Orthodox synagogue, was Shabbat. Friday evening Rabbi Prince led a Carlebach Kabbalat Shabbat, and the students directed both a festive dinner, with *divrei Torah*, songs and dancing, and a "tisch in the dark," a novel experience for the synagogue congregants. While the Ma'ayanot students ran the programming for Friday night, members of the local community entertained the students on Shabbat day, with a performance by the children's choir and with a discussion session with community members about both the history of the Omaha Jewish community and what it is like to live in a relatively small Jewish community.

The students went into Shabbat with the goal of having an impact on the community; for example, sophomore Avigail Gottlieb noted that the community loved the singing, *ruach* and *divrei Torah* that the students brought to the community. However, she also noted that the community had a large impact on the students as well: "Being there made us realize how lucky we are to have such a great yeshiva high school (the local yeshiva ends after sixth grade), and kosher food whenever and wherever we want it... It made us realize that we should not take these things for granted."

On Sunday, students visited RESPECT, a Nebraska nonprofit committed to decreasing violence and abuse in relationships, where they prepared stuffed animals for school-age children attending RESPECT seminars, and they participated in a session aimed at providing the students with tools to deal with possible encounters with abuse—of themselves or others.

While this and all of the prior joint Ma'ayanot/NJ NCSY missions were about *chesed* and *tikkun olam*, they were also, according to Rabbi Prince, about cultivating a culture of leadership. During a debriefing at the end of the trip, Rabbis Prince and Katz



explained to the students that they were able to make a difference in Omaha because **NCSY** and Ma'ayanot worked hard to create opportunities for them to do so. The rabbis challenged the students to view this trip as a model and to "think about how they can find opportunities to create and run programming that will help make a difference for their school community, the greater Jewish community, and for people outside of the Jewish community as well"

If prior missions are an indication, this leadership message comes through loud and clear; Arielle Isaac (14), who partici-

pated two years ago, served as Ma'ayanot's Student Government President last year, and current senior Tova Sklar, another recent participant, is now the International President of NCSY. Rabbi Prince was also pleased to note that three students from this year's mission have already sat down with school faculty members to discuss running for Student Government positions next year. "We know that our students can achieve anything we put before them, but sometimes we have to bring them a thousand miles away so that they can discover their strengths as well."

