

NCSY Assists in New Orleans

By Aliza Chasan

Eight and a half years have passed since Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and organizations like NCSY are still making relief trips. This past week, Rabbi Ethan Katz, Regional Director of New Jersey NCSY, led 29 teenage girls- 20 from NCSY and nine from local public schools- on a relief trip to the Louisiana city.

"The condition in the poorer neighborhoods hasn't changed that drastically in the last few year; it's still in horrible shape," Rabbi Katz said.

The five day trip was packed full for the girls: they worked with Habitat for Humanity, did a tour of the Jewish neighborhood, worked with Apex to help at risk youths, spent Shabbos with the local community, visited a Jewish Senior Citizens Home, and worked with Green Light New Orleans to help people in poorer neighborhoods with energy conservation.

Day one with Habitat for Humanity involved working on two houses at opposite ends of the completion spectrum- at one house they were doing final landscaping and at the other they were laying beams for the base of the house.

"The girls truly gave it their all, working a full day; they worked to their maximum," said Becky Katz, a Ma'ayanot math teacher who accompanied the girls on the trip.

Eliana Koehler, one of the Ma'ayanot students on the trip, said that though everyone felt exhausted by the first day's end, it was a satisfied exhaustion, one of accomplishment.

"I was amazed to see, despite the lack of sleep, that everyone possessed an enthusiastic smile and was excited to help make a difference. For us, it was not just nailing boards and neatening lawns, it was a warm feeling knowing that we built a home," Koehler wrote in a blog she kept on the trip. "We built a place for a family to grow, prosper, make memories, cry, laugh, and everything in between. We created that atmosphere. It was therefore not surprising to see the surrounding enthusiasm because there was a reason. The idea that we were a small gear in a larger machine that would one day make a loving home, that was a common thought threading through every single mind in the group."

Not all of the work done was manual labor. The girls also created Purim related programming at a local Jewish Day school and visited a Jewish Senior Citizens home that does not normally receive teenage visitors because, according to Katz, there are no Jewish teenagers in New Orleans. Over Shabbos, the program participants gave divrei torah in the shul and over the meal.

The old Shul in New Orleans was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina along with many sefarim and sifrei Torah. The girls visited the cemetery where the ruined books were buried. Dr. Murray Leben, Chairman of the NJ NCSY board who joined the students on the trip, was especially touched by the local Jewish community's story.

He and Rabbi Katz both bought one of their daughters with them. "I specifically wanted to expose them to the tremendous chessed we give out and the tremendous inspiration we get back," Dr. Leben said. "I think we get more than we give."

Koehler agreed that she, and the 18 other students, received something important. "As we walked away, although we all looked the same, we were changed. We had a new perspective as to what it meant to give and what an impact that can make," she said. "It was only one day, not even 24 hours but the power of those hours is something that I will never forget."

This was a first time trip for both Leben and Becky Katz, but the 12th trip for Rabbi Katz and the 22nd NCSY trip to the city overall. The trips are part of an ongoing project to help teenagers learn the gravity of natural disasters and give them the ability to help those in need.

"It lets you see what high school students are capable of doing when you let them try things," Mrs. Becky Katz said.

Rabbi Yair Silverman of Moed Visits NJ

Teaneck—Rabbi Yair Silverman, founder of the Israeli organization Moed, visited Keter Torah and Netivot Shalom last Shabbos. Silverman created Moed seven years ago as an organic, grassroots community in Zichron Yaakov, in the north of Israel. It is an open and inclusive *kehillah* comprised of Jews from a range of nationalities, beliefs, and socio-economic groups. "What unites us is our approach to inquiring with openness, fostering mutual respect, engaging dialogue, and pursuing dreams," said Silverman.

Last year, Moed hosted over 300 programs, ranging from city-wide holiday events to individual life-cycle celebrations. "When we conceived of this project we were trying to find a way to truly empower kids and their families to do good. We want them to feel ownership and responsibility to the adult world they are about to enter. The goal is not to just instill Jewish values, but teach the children how to act on them so



Children visit a hospital through a Moed Chessed program.

they will carry them throughout their lives," said Silverman.

Materials and programs that Moed has developed have been used in a wide variety of communities seeking meaning. "The model that we have incubated locally in Zichron Yaakov has the promise to transform Israeli communal society by empowering multiple ways to connect to Jewish life and community," he said.

His topic at Keter Torah was "Wine, Purim and Israel: Striving for Excellence." At Congregation

Netivot Shalom, his lecture was about "One People, Divided; The Culture of Controversy: *Machlochet* in the Talmud." On Motzei Shabbat, he spoke at the Teaneck home of Shifra and Dani Bendheim. His topic there was "Unity without Uniformity: Building Community in Israel."

The Moed welcoming committee was comprised of Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot, David (Doodie) Miller, Aliza Neuer-Engel, Rabbi Jacob J. Schachter, Jonathan Schor, Pamela Scheininger, Dr. Lisa Schlaff, and Gail Steckler.

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