

NEW JERSEY ROCKLAND Jewish Standard

Local students aid hurricane victims

Josh Lipowsky | Local |

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A group of 13 students from Torah Academy of Bergen County and Fair Lawn High School traveled to Texas last week to help with hurricane relief efforts. Top from left, Eddie Ostrovsky, Dani Fidrya, Rabbi Ethan Katz, Yoni Audi, Rabbi Yechiel Shaffer, Gavi Berger, Rabbi Josh Kahn, Jeremy Levart, Rabbi Yosef Golubchek, Dan Hoest. Bottom from left, Ely Shestack, Avi Schwartz, Akiva Buckman, Ezra Fishman, Jason Katz, Yair Klyman, Tzvi Atkin.

Thirteen students from Torah Academy of Bergen County and Fair Lawn High School returned on Sunday from Texas, after spending two days last week helping residents clean up their homes damaged or destroyed during Hurricane Ike.

The trip, organized by the Orthodox Union's National Council of Synagogue Youth and the Teaneck-based TABC, was inspired by one the youth group and yeshiva took to New Orleans last year. Ten TABC students went to the embattled city last fall to help with ongoing Hurricane Katrina reconstruction efforts.

"After following the story of Ike, we decided that instead of going to New Orleans it'd be more real to go to a place that had just had a hurricane there and needed a lot of help," said Rabbi Josh Kahn, TABC's director of student activities, who accompanied the students.

This year's volunteers, a mix of juniors and seniors, arrived in Beaumont, Texas, last Wednesday night and spent the following two days in Oak Island, working with Nechama, a Jewish disaster relief organization based in Minneapolis and St. Paul.



TABC students Benjy Lebowitz, Avi Schwartz, and Akiva Buckman cleaning out a kitchen in a home ravaged by Hurricane Ike. Photos provided by Torah Academy of Bergen County

"I was expecting to go there and it would be kind of cleaned up," said 17-year-old Akiva Buckman, a TABC senior from Teaneck. "We got there and [even] on the insides of the buildings it was complete destruction."

Nothing the school did could have really prepared the boys, Kahn said.

"You don't know what it's going to smell like; you don't know what it's really like," he added.

Last Thursday, the students visited Doris, a widow who had turned a storage shed into a home office. When the boys arrived, they saw furniture, books, and papers covered in mud. The woman, who lives in a trailer on her property, had no way to clean up her office.

"Our goal was to empower the students and help them appreciate the power they have to help and to ... save a life and, with that, a whole world," said Kahn.

"It made me feel like the epitome of what a Jew should be," Akiva said. "I really felt like this is what I should be doing as an American Jew."

Later that evening, a representative from Nechama told the visitors that a woman had been crying in the organization's office for several hours. She and her son had moved to a motel and were uncertain how to deal with their flooded home.

"She'd been sitting at this office for a bunch of hours crying, unable to have a conversation, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder," Kahn said. "We assured her we'd come to her house, take it step by step."

When the boys arrived at her eight-bedroom home on Friday, they discovered that every room had been under about 6 feet of water. They were faced with mud, hay, and animal excrement, as well as toppled and destroyed furniture.

"Everything we could save, we put on the side. Everything that was destroyed we put in the garbage," said Yoni Audi, 17, of Fair Lawn. "It was more than I imagined."

The trip's focus sharpened for 16-year-old Gavi Berger while the group was eating lunch in Oak Island and he found a broken sign on a floor that read "Another Day in Paradise."

"Now their paradise was pretty much ruined," said Gavi, a TABC junior from Teaneck. "They had their whole life built up there, but in a manner of a few days it was all destroyed."

Organizers were pleased with the empathy the students expressed during the trip, which they viewed as part of the students' Jewish development.

"We believe there's a lot we can bring to the life of a Jewish teen outside of the classroom that can really help shape their passion and enthusiasm for Judaism and recognize their role in the larger world," said Rabbi Yaakov Glasser, director of New Jersey's NCSY region, headquartered in Teaneck.

Beyond giving the students an opportunity for community service, the trip's goal was also to broaden their views of life in areas that are not as heavily Jewish as Bergen County.

"We discovered one of the challenges teens have in Jewish communities that are so well established is they begin to develop a real sense of entitlement," said Glasser. "We wanted the trip to be an opportunity to shatter that perception that the whole world is like Cedar Lane," the Teaneck main street that is lined with kosher restaurants.

To help snap the TABC students out of that mindset, the trip included three students from Fair Lawn High School who have participated in NCSY programs.

"The TABC students were able to appreciate a little bit more their own Jewish identities," Glasser said. "The public school students got to see normal teens who embraced an Orthodox life and live in a modern world."

The students felt "tremendous unity" among themselves and with the Texas community, said Rabbi Ethan Katz, NCSY's assistant director, who accompanied the group.

Yoni, who moved to Fair Lawn from Israel a year ago, found that Hebrew was a common bond with the TABC boys.

"It was not that difficult to get along with them," he said. "It was kind of cool to meet other people."

All the students exchanged contact information by the end of the trip, Kahn said, and many of them said they would volunteer for similar projects in the future.

"The hope is that this experience is internalized and becomes part of who they are and something they'll bring with them for the rest of their lives," he added.