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Wanted: Junior Philanthropists

Looking for the funders of the future, foundations are cultivating teens to look beyond their bnai mitzvah projects.



B'nai Tzedek Youth Philanthropy teen leaders consult with Ruth W. Messinger, President of the American Jewish World Service, far right, on raising funds and awareness to help stop the genocidal crisis in Darfur, Sudan.

by Randi Sherman
Staff Writer

When many newly crowned Jewish “adults” celebrate their bar or bat mitzvahs, the idea of tzedakah ends with their mitzvah project, but not for Lee Rosenthal. For Lee’s bar mitzvah project, his focus was the Million Voices campaign for Darfur. He raised money and sent postcards to the White House promoting awareness of the genocide taking place in Sudan. His devotion to the victims of the Sudanese genocide didn’t end at his bar mitzvah though; he kept working for the campaign.



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NY Resources



For a growing number of Jewish teens like Lee, tzedakah doesn't end with the b'nai mitzvah celebration. Instead of abandoning the cause they devoted themselves to in the months before the big day, teens ages 13 to 18 are becoming even more involved in Jewish philanthropy, devoting even more time, effort and funding through organizations like the Harold Grinspoon Foundation's B'nai Tzedek Teen Philanthropy Program and the Jewish Communal Fund's Children's Giving Fund.

This past June, the Grinspoon Foundation announced the proposed expansion of their already successful B'nai Tzedek program. The Foundation, which launched the program 10 years ago to help teens create individual endowment funds and personally manage allocations, is offering a total \$300,000 in grant money to add another 10 B'nai Tzedek groups to the 37 that had already been established in North America. Groups are found everywhere from Winnipeg to Western Massachusetts, the first ever group which also serves as the model. So far, two communities have been approved for funding: Dayton, Ohio, and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, according to Gail Lansky, national director of B'nai Tzedek.

Lee Rosenthal's B'nai Tzedek group, the one in closest proximity to New York, is run through the Jewish Federation of Central New Jersey, which covers parts of Union and Somerset counties. Jessica Mehlman, assistant director of financial resource development at the Central New Jersey Federation, has been working on the program for the past year and a half and says it will be ready to launch later this month.

"We had played with the idea a couple years before, but leadership shot it down," Mehlman said. "Now, with lay leadership involved, people got a lot more excited." Mehlman ran a 20-parent focus group to help form the region's first B'nai Tzedek after campaign chair Janice Weinberg heard a presentation about the program at the GA. Six families have expressed interest in enrolling their teens. Joanie Rosenthal, a member of the original panel and Lee's mother, welcomes the new group.

"I'm always looking for hands-on projects to get my kids involved," Joanie Rosenthal said. "They know we're active in Federation, participating in food drop-offs and [other activities] but it's not accessible to them at their level. This is the perfect time to explain philanthropy to them, when they're reaching bar mitzvah year."

Teens in Central New Jersey will be required to donate a minimum \$1,000 but unlike some other B'nai Tzedek groups they will not offer matching funding from a local endowment. Whereas some groups focus on keeping the endowment money in local organizations, Central New Jersey will allow participants to donate to any Jewish organization worldwide. Embracing Harold Grinspoon's belief that one doesn't have to be rich to become a philanthropist, the Western Massachusetts model group, boasting 600 members, requires \$125 from participants at the time of their b'nai mitzvah, matched by a local endowment and doubled again by the Grinspoon Foundation.

Mehlman's first program with Central New Jersey B'nai Tzedek is a pizza and ice cream party with guest speaker Adam Simkin, a graduate of Western Massachusetts B'nai Tzedek, and "every Jewish mother's dream. B'nai Tzedek changed his life," Mehlman said. Other programs in the works for the Central New Jersey group are mini missions, trips to see potential funding recipients both in New Jersey and New York, a trip that will include some sightseeing and a possible trip to the Tenement Museum. The idea is to keep the sessions both fun and informative so "once we get the kids on board, they'll start talking," both to their friends and their parents, Mehlman said.

The key is to keep philanthropy within the Jewish community, no matter what cause you choose.

"Whatever your passion is, you can find a Jewish organizations that fits," Joanie

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Rosenthal said.

For New Yorkers, who have no local B'nai Tzedek, another option for instilling the value of tzedakah is Jewish Communal Fund's Children's Giving Fund. Established around the same time as B'nai Tzedek, the program allows parents to start an endowment on behalf of their children, contributing \$1,800. This program can be started years before b'nai mitzvah age.

The fund begins as a custodial account, with the child and an adult recommending grants for sectarian or nonsectarian charities of their choosing, with a minimum grant amount of \$36. Children and parents have the option of continually adding to the fund, in celebration of milestones such as birthdays, bar mitzvahs and graduations. Donors also have access to the JCF database of charitable organizations and the ability to view their fund online.

When the child turns 18, they take over responsibility for the account. The fund continues to grow and all decisions for allocations are transferred over to the young adult. n

For more information about the B'nai Tzedek grant application process, contact Gail Lansky at (413) 439-1950. For more information about Children's Giving Fund, contact Abby Tucker at (212) 580-4523.

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