

Ripening Opportunities for Service Work Among Young Jews

By Sandy Cardin

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Imagine this: a group of young Jews preparing for graduation from high school are trading tales about where they will be living next year. But instead of tossing around town names like Cambridge, New Haven and Madison, they are making certain they have their friends' email addresses before they head off to Sderot, East Los Angeles, and Buenos Aires.

What if it became as commonplace for our young people to say, "Where are you doing your service next year?" as they now ask each other, "Where did you apply early decision?" There's no reason that can't become a familiar refrain and members of our community are taking important steps to make it happen.

Service has always been an integral part of what our foundation supports. We believe in it, we work in partnership with organizations that foster it, and we find sustenance in it.

Lynn Schusterman likes to tell the story about how her own philanthropic journey began. When she was a little girl, her father used to take her around with him as he assisted people in their community. He taught her-- "each of us is worth only what we are willing to give to others." As a foundation, it's also what we do every day. We strive to give back to the communities we hold most dear and to encourage young Jews to join us in these efforts.

To our immense delight, what we have discovered is that our youth are already beginning to pick up the challenge. In ever increasing numbers, young Jews are working to make a difference in the world. We often talk about finding young Jews where they are, but in this case, it's not about a physical location; it's about helping these motivated young people seize the moment and act upon their desire to make the world a better place. And it's about strengthening their Jewish identities by helping them understand that performing service -- *tikkun olam* -- is a core Jewish value.

What can we do as philanthropists to strengthen this impulse, harness the energy and ensure that as many university-age Jews as possible who wish to give back before they return to their studies will have the chance to do so in a Jewish framework? We can give them our blessing and support by making sure that these opportunities exist in both the Jewish and general communities.

The turning point for our foundation was in December of 2006 when 550 young adults on our Leading Up North program went to Israel to help communities in the North rebuild after the destruction of the war with Hezbollah. This powerful experience led us to look at alternative break programs. How could we expand the number of young Jews

who are doing meaningful service projects on college breaks?

Our short term solution for this year was to make separate challenge grants to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, American Jewish World Service, Hillel, Jewish Funds for Justice, the Jewish National Fund, and Yeshiva University with a goal of increasing by 30% the number of students participating this year in alternative break programs. The early results of those grants are very encouraging; each of the six organizations met our challenge and is reporting significantly greater participation in these immersive Jewish service experiences. Longer term, we are partnering with several other foundations in a planning process we are confident will lead to an exponential increase in both participation and support for these kinds of programs.

The field of Jewish service is ripe for expansion and support. Our young people aspire to change the world, and helping them pursue their dreams while strengthening their Jewish identity is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss. Additionally, this is a tremendous opportunity to the entire community. By targeting funds and supporting program providers, we can inspire and connect young Jews while making a generational difference that will benefit the Jewish people for years to come.