

07/27/2007  
JEWISH L.A.

## Teens tackle tzedakah dollars

By Julie Gruenbaum Fax, Education Editor

Courtney Teller knows all about giving. The high school sophomore won the community service award at Archer School for Girls, and her grandmother, Annette Shapiro, is a legendary volunteer and philanthropist in the Los Angeles Jewish community.

But it was the parking situation at a playground for the disabled that gave Courtney a new appreciation for the potential impact of tzedakah.

As part of her participation in the Community Youth Foundation -- a program of the Jewish Community Foundation of Los Angeles where teens allocate \$10,000 in grants -- Teller and her friends visited Shane's Inspiration, a West L.A. playground for the disabled. While she was moved by the hordes of kids, both abled and disabled, playing on the rubber-padded, accessibly designed equipment, the fact that it took her 30 minutes to find parking signaled to her that demand had outpaced supply.

"It was a Saturday afternoon and it was packed -- you couldn't get near it," Teller said. "It was important to me that I saw where we could really make a difference."

It was her impassioned plea, in part, that convinced the group of 11 teens to award Shane's Inspiration a \$1,000 grant to support their expansion of similar projects.

Teller and her peers are among a growing number of teens getting involved in the giving -- not just doing -- end of community service. Youth foundations and individual teen endowments across the country are empowering teens of all economic levels to make values-based and technically informed decisions about what is worthy of their support.

Jewish teens have given away an estimated \$1 million dollars -- most of it community money, a token amount of it their own -- since these philanthropic training camps began to emerge in scattered Jewish communities about 10 years ago.

In the last year energy has been building, and there are about 50 such projects. Last spring, the Jewish Funders Network co-sponsored the first-ever Jewish Youth Philanthropy conference in Denver, after about five years of informal networking among teens and professionals. The conference attracted more than 150 teens, and a follow-up conference for professionals this spring attracted dozens. A Web site launched at the first conference, [jphilanthropy.com](http://jphilanthropy.com), run by Jewish Family and Life Media, received 200,000 hits in its first year.

After the youth philanthropy conference last spring -- which overlapped with the high-powered Jewish Funders Network conference -- several donors backed the establishment of the Jewish Teen Funders Network to serve as a central address for these programs. This year, the network is considering proposals to award 10 communities matching grants of \$30,000 to set up new youth foundation programs.

"I think a very strong motivation behind these programs is the idea of providing a hands-on, values-driven educational opportunity for teenagers that provides an alternative to Hebrew school," said Stefanie Zelkind, who runs the Jewish Teen Funders Network, an arm of the Jewish Funders Network. "The general area of

service learning and tikkun olam resonates a lot with teenagers, and this is a program that really engages teens very seriously and gives them a lot of responsibility."

The experience also demands serious work from the teens.

Teller and her peers spent three Sundays learning the mechanics of giving -- how to read the financials of a nonprofit, how to conduct the research and what questions to ask to assess an organization's efficacy and the impact of a potential donation.

"We were the ones doing everything," Teller said.

This is the fourth group of teens -- all of them children and grandchildren of philanthropic families associated with the Jewish Community Foundation -- that the Community Youth Foundation has entrusted to disburse \$10,000.

They begin by brainstorming about problems and organizations that can achieve solutions. They each research several organizations, and then narrow the list down to organizations worthy of site visits -- an important step for a generation that relies heavily on the web for information.

After the visits, the teens gather to debate each organization's comparative merits, and negotiate with each other to choose who will receive grants.

The only limitation is that half the money must go to Jewish causes. Beyond that, teens decide not only which organizations around the world to give to, but to how many and at what level, an exercise that opens up deep discussion on Jewish traditions of giving.

"The kids really learn how complicated it can be to conduct effective philanthropy," said Susan Grinel, who runs the Community Youth Foundation for the Jewish Community Foundation. "It's really a maturing process."

Aside from Shane's inspiration, Teller and her peers awarded \$5,000 to Jewish World Watch, which is working for humanitarian aid and political awareness in Darfur, and \$4,000 to L.A. Youth Network, which works with homeless kids and teens.

The fact that the kids decided to give to programs that are not specifically Jewish is typical not only of their generation, but of gen-Xers as well -- a trend some baby boomers and their parents find disconcerting. Grinel says the Jewish Community Foundation set up the youth program in response to concerns about generational disparities that kept coming up among foundation donor families.

"When the younger generation says I want to give to Darfur, and the older generation says this Jewish community in Los Angeles is what gave me my start and I think we should focus here, how do you begin to bridge that gap and let people talk on common ground?" said Grinel, who also runs the Family Foundation Center for the Jewish Community Foundation.

Grinel has found that focusing discussions on core, motivating values usually reveals a smaller gap than initially perceived, and unpacking those values can be educational for everyone involved.

"I think these programs present the Jewish community with a serious opportunity to listen and to learn from these teenagers," said Zelkind of the Jewish Teen Funders Network. "The best of these programs are being used in that way rather than in guiding the teenagers to make the kinds of decisions that their community leaders and parents would like them to make."

It is that interplay between adults and teens that makes these programs attractive -- kids are handing out large sums of money, and the adults who want that money, or who want to see that money disbursed intelligently, must treat teens seriously whether on site visits, at the dinner table, or in the board room. Kids, in turn, learn how to behave in adult milieus.

"The bottom line is it's about empowering young people to be a part of the solution in our community. So many times young people are seen as the problem, but this helps people understand that our teens have a lot to offer and that their perspective is really valuable," said Lisa Farber Miller, who runs one of the largest such programs, the Rose Youth Foundation in Denver, which disburses \$50,000 a year during seven months of meetings.

Miller says some program alumni have chosen public advocacy work because of their experience at the youth foundation, and for many kids, it's an entry point to Jewish life for kids who are done with bar or bat mitzvah training and may not be interested in youth group or more Hebrew school.

"It is keeping kids connected to the Temple whom we otherwise might have lost," said Rabbi Laura Geller of Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills, where MATCH -- Money and Teenagers Creating Hope -- a four-year-old teen foundation, pulled in 47 kids this year. "Some of them use MATCH as a door back into the synagogue and get involved in the youth group or as teachers' aides in our religious school. For other kids, MATCH is their only connection to the Temple, but it is still enough of a connection that they turn to their rabbis to write letters of recommendation for college and even stay in touch once they go away to school."

MATCH entrusts kids with a \$250,000 endowment, which spins off about \$10,000

in grants a year. The kids are also required to put in \$72 of their own to participate in the process, which involves seven Sunday meetings that combine Torah study around Jewish values with hands-on research. The teens and their parents also attended a reception where they met with leading philanthropists.

Involving the family in the process is a common thread among many of these programs.

At Pressman Academy's philanthropy class for seventh-graders, inaugurated last year, a family interview is an integral part of a year-long curriculum.

"School is not just about educating the student, but educating families as well," said Pressman headmaster Rabbi Mitch Malkus. "Children might know that giving is a priority in their family, but I don't know if families actually sit down together and say 'where are we going to give and why are we going to give to these places.'"

Layered on top of an existing tikkun olam curriculum and social action program, the philanthropy class taught the kids about the organizational structures of the Jewish community and the Jewish values behind giving. Philanthropist Marilyn Ziering addressed the class, and the kids did their own research to decide how to allocate \$2,000.

The \$2,000 came from a bar/bat mitzvah gift fund that parents contributed to so that each student receives a gift from the fund, rather than one from every classmate. In fact, the inevitable focus on money surrounding the celebration -- expensive party, generous cash gifts, attention heaped on one kid -- makes the bar/bat mitzvah year a ripe time to open a discussion on philanthropy.

"For us it's a strategic decision, trying to transform an event that is a traditional

kind of life marker into an opportunity to get down to core Jewish values," Malkus said.

"This is the first time most of these kids will have that much money and have to make decisions about how to use that money. We hope to set the foundation of a lifetime of giving."

Getting teens into the habit of giving is the goal of the B'nai Tzedek Teen Philanthropy Program, run by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation in Massachusetts. The Grinspoon Foundation has helped 36 communities set up programs where local foundations match a bar or bat mitzvah kid's own contribution to set up an endowment of \$500, for which the child is responsible. The program usually includes educational programs and networking, so the kids can become part of a community of givers.

While initially the endowment only spins off about \$25 of grant money annually, it keeps the kids involved indefinitely, as opposed to youth foundation models, which end with high school. Many participants, who started their funds more than 10 years ago, when the program began, have been adding to the principal and continue to allocate grants every year.

"I think B'nai Tzedek creates kids who are connected to their communities, kids who are connected to giving and this keeps them on the map Jewishly even after their bar mitzvahs," said Gail Lansky, national director of the B'nai Tzedek program at the Harold Grinspoon Foundation.

In fact, youth philanthropy in general has been such a successful tool of engagement, it is moving back up the generational ladder: The Jewish Community Foundation in San Diego -- one of the first in the country to have a youth foundation -- has brought the Hillel crowd into the picture. And the Rose

Foundation in Denver has constituted sub-boards for community foundations made up of people in their 30s and 40s.

"I'm sure they will be opening our eyes to new and different things," said Miller of the Rose Foundation. "We are hopeful that they will be social change agents, and create the kind of Jewish community they want."

[http://www.tebh.org/social\\_justice/index.php?match](http://www.tebh.org/social_justice/index.php?match)

<http://jphilanthropy.com>

<http://jewishyouthfunders.org/>

<http://www.jfunders.org/programs/jewish-teen-funders-network>

<http://www.pressmanacademy.org/>

<http://www.rcfdenver.org/RYF/>

© 2006-7 The Jewish Journal. All Rights Reserved.