

## **Responsibility, Trust, and Leadership: The Magic of Teen Empowerment**

By Aviva Perlman

This past September a regular topic of conversation with my teens was, naturally, the election. They would consistently express frustration over being unable to vote and play their part in influencing decisions being made. However, like any determined individuals faced with a challenge, they knew they simply had to find alternative ways to contribute their voices to this arena.

Along with the election, a growing concern amongst our teens was the Syrian refugee crisis. MLK Day of Service co-Chair Aaron Hersch said, "For the past year, news headlines about and photographs of Syrian refugees have been flashing in front of our eyes. There is the Jewish value of not standing idly by, and seeing this need, I felt obligated to help."

When J-Teen Leadership was invited by the UJA-Federation of NY to apply for a grant from their Time for Good initiative to create an MLK Day of Service program, Aaron and a fellow MLK Day of Service co-Chair, Jordyn Glantz, knew this was their opportunity to do something about the crisis. They sat down and developed a project to bring over 200 teens together to collect, sort, and pack humanitarian supplies for shipment to refugees in Northwest Iraq via a Westchester based organization called the Afya Foundation. Afya is a medical supply rescue organization that collects functional medical supplies being discarded by US hospitals and distributes them to crisis areas abroad. UJA recognized the importance of our proposed project and generously awarded our teens \$18,000 to make this event happen.

"We do service on MLK Day with Afya every year, but this year it was 10 times larger," said Jordyn. "It was for a pressing cause that we've been hearing so much about and I was excited that we would finally be able to do something about it."

"Something unique to this event was how we involved the entire Westchester community even before the project took place," said co-Chair Hannah Malter, referring to the over 15 collection sites set up by her and her peers in synagogues, churches, schools, and libraries all over the county. "I loved being a Collection Ambassador because it allowed me to represent my temple and be a leader for this event."

The Ambassadors didn't disappoint, carting in boxes, bins, and bags of what amounted to approximately \$200,000 worth of supplies (including band-aids, soap, diapers, and toothbrushes) into Westchester Reform Temple, our project site, before the event. In recognition of their work, Ambassadors were promoted to Event Captains the day of the event and were tasked with managing the distribution, sorting, and packing of those donated supplies in various classrooms. With 215 teen volunteers, and only a limited number of adults, we relied on Event Captains to help the event run smoothly.

One teen volunteer reflected, "I was surprised to see how trusted we were with the supplies. There wasn't constant supervision from adults thinking we would do something wrong."

As this volunteer implied, teens are accustomed to a culture where they are constantly

underestimated. At J-Teen Leadership, we recognize, harness, and celebrate their potential. When they believe in the work they are doing, are given the space to do that work, and are encouraged to take leadership roles, teens can make great things happen – often in more innovative ways than their adult counterparts.

The magic of teen empowerment can be an inspiration to the extended community. As MLK Day approached, our event made waves across Westchester. We caught the eyes of the Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees, whose founder, Dr. Georgette Bennett, joined in and spoke to us. The local AJC chapter sent email blasts encouraging its constituents to contribute to the project. A couple from the St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Rye Brook contributed \$2000 to sponsor two pallets of supplies in our shipment. An 85-year-old woman from Mamaroneck, unable to contribute supplies, gave a monetary donation after reading about us in a local newspaper. And Alex Myteberi – the six-year-old Scarsdale boy who authored the viral letter to President Obama about Syrian refugees – hand-delivered donations prior to our event. Alex's mother, having heard about our initiative from a colleague, contacted me to see how Alex could help. "He feels very happy other people, like you and our community in Westchester, are doing good things to help these children in need," she wrote. "Most places ask for money and donations – which we have done. But this is a more meaningful and tangible way for kids to help."

J-Teen Leadership has a track record of being quick to act by creating meaningful and tangible service work. In fact, it's how we got our start over 10 years ago. In 2006, following Hurricane Katrina, teens were invited to join a UJA group on a relief mission to Louisiana. Very quickly, the group grew large enough to create its own teen service trip, traveling to Baton Rouge to work with displaced people in an isolated FEMA trailer park. Now, a decade on, our current teens are continuing the legacy that our founding teens began, mobilizing their peers to get their hands dirty and help those most in need of our support.

Co-Chair Ethan Afran reflected, "I am so thankful that this day of service ran smoothly...and I am very optimistic that with a positive and open mindset, we can continue to fight to make the world a better place for everyone."

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