

Shabbat Shalom. My name is Paul Trokie and I'm here this morning to share with you my recent experiences with J-Teen Leadership. J-Teen was formed to help Jewish teens like myself, develop leadership and advocacy skills through community service projects and trips throughout the U.S. and even internationally. Through these projects and trips we are able to learn about and better understand the important Jewish concepts of "Chesed" or "loving-kindness" and "Tikun Olam" – healing the world.

Originally formed after Hurricane Katrina to help out the Jewish communities around New Orleans, J-Teen each year organizes projects and service trip to help out Jewish communities in need. This year, J-Teen is planning trips to Oklahoma City, Cuba and Argentina. While the trip to Oklahoma City is to help the community deal with the devastation caused by the recent tornados which tore through much of the area, the trip to Cuba, which has become an annual trip over the last few years, helps the small Jewish community there deal with poverty and a lack of resources which many of the families face. And as the trips to Cuba have shown, it is important to go to some places more than once, because it enables you to make connections and bond with the people, since another big part of being part of J-Teen is hearing the personal stories of the people you help and learning about them. And since the J-Teen programs are actually planned and voted on by the kids in the group, you can help people but have fun while doing it.

Last November, over Veteran's Day weekend, I went to Far Rockaway, Queens and Brooklyn with J-Teen to provide relief from Sandy and help with a community food kitchen. Before we left, we were all asked to participate in a drive to get our

neighbors and friends to donate food, supplies or donations for the different places we were going to. We got tools to help repair the houses we were going to work on; food for the food kitchen we were going to; and children's books for the Synagogue daycare center we were going to help clean up.

When we got to Far Rockaway, we first met up with Friends from Far Rockaway, a local group we partnered with to do the repair work on houses damaged by Sandy. It was surprising to me how many people there were whose lives still haven't returned to normal and whose houses still needed work done on them after so much time had passed. We split into three groups which would each work on a different house. When we got to the house we were assigned to, we were then told what we needed to do and how to do it. For my house, we were responsible for putting primer on all the wall of the basement and sanding the ceilings. The lady whose house it was, lived there with her daughter and was an antique collector. Her husband had passed away around six months before the storm and due to confusion caused by the death of her husband, the flood insurance was not renewed, which meant the woman had no flood insurance when Sandy hit and couldn't afford to make the repairs to her house by herself. Even worse, when her basement was flooded, all the antiques that she had stored there were destroyed causing her to lose what little property of value that she had. After we finished up priming the walls and we mudded in between the drywall, we had an opportunity to meet with the owner and hear her tell her story. It really drove home how much we were helping by meeting the owner and seeing what our help meant to her.

We also visited the JCCRP food pantry in Far Rockaway and got to meet with one of the Board members, who took us for a tour and explained how the food kitchen operated. She told us how people were lined up out through the door in order to get a meal and that the lines grew even longer after Sandy hit. We donated all the food we had collected to the food pantry, which was quite a bit, and knew the food would be put to good use.

In addition to the food pantry, we also went to the West End Reform Synagogue, where we met with the Rabbi who talked to us and told us about the Synagogue's history. The Synagogue had been badly damaged by the flooding from Sandy and the Congregation was forced to hold services in people's houses since their main sanctuary still wasn't useable, and could take a whole year more to repair. We then ate dinner at the synagogue and heard other people's stories from the storm, including one girl who had made a difference through her volunteer work and even got invited to the White House. We donated the children's books we had collected to the Synagogue daycare program.

On our last day, we went to the Masbia soup kitchen in Brooklyn, which serves around 600 portions of food each day. It is an entirely kosher soup kitchen which is not very common, and unlike the food pantry we had visited in which you could go back more than once each day, you were limited to only one visit during each allotted time frame. While we were there, we were split into two main groups, with one group peeling potatoes and the other group cutting zucchinis, with a few other kids doing some other special activities.

On the bus ride back home, we all discussed what we had done and what it had meant to us, as well as sharing the different stories we heard and people we met.

We then counted up the donations and gift cards we had raised during our supply drive before the trip and voted on how and who to donate the money and gift cards to. We sent a majority of the money to Masbia soup kitchen and we sent most of the gift cards to the JCCRP food pantry.

As I have never been involved in a service project like this before, and have been fortunate enough to live in a community where most of us have not known true hardship, my eyes were opened to the suffering and need that many people experience on a daily basis. By getting involved in hands on work and meeting the people I was helping, it made the experience much more real and satisfying than the simple act of giving a money to a charity. And I found the emotional part of the trip, in forming bonds and connections with the teens I worked with and the people I helped, to be just as important to me as the work I did, and helped me truly understand the meaning of "Tikun Olam".