

Harrison Singer

My Houston Experience

I woke up on January 15th and I was exhausted. It was safe to say that I wasn't too thrilled about getting up at 4:30 in the morning. But once I took a nap on the way to the airport and woke up, I was able to realize something. How many people get the chance to go help others in an entirely different part of the country? More importantly, how many people are even fortunate enough to do it? It didn't take much thought to realize that there was nothing to be mad about. I might not have slept too long in my bed that night, but how many people didn't have a bed to sleep in at all following the floods that infiltrated the homes of Houstonians?

After arriving, I immediately recognized differences between the people of Houston compared to New Yorkers. Without any cowboy boots on my feet, I was pretty sure that I didn't blend in. The warm, sunny weather was a nice break from frigid New York temperatures. By then, it was safe to say that I was much looking forward to this trip.

It all started at the Montessori School, where we ate lunch and listened to firsthand stories about the floods. It was so powerful to hear these stories from people who actually experienced it. I then had the privilege to meet a new friend named Ben, along with watching Guy juggle for the first time and I was probably just as amused as that 4-year-old kid right next to me.

There was no better way to top off a day than the Friday night service we attended at Brit Shalom. With Rabbi Teller jamming out on the guitar, we enjoyed an array of rocking Kabbalat Shabbat songs, most notably, "Deep in the Heart of Texas." We followed up an incredible service by feasting on some delicious vegetable chili and a captivating story from more firsthand flood victims.

The next night, we met fellow Jewish teenagers at the local BBYO event. I had a great time talking with them about life in both New York and Texas. It was really interesting to compare similarities and differences. For instance, as I froze my tail off after returning home, they were hanging out at the Houston rodeo. We got back to hotel and capped off an enjoyable night by eating dominos for the second time in two nights.

We got up on Sunday and went to the Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church. It was my first ever church service and I was blown away by the passion and rhythm of the congregation. What I was most impressed with was the communal element throughout the church. Written in the service guide were all the ill people in the community, and surely enough the entire congregation prayed for them. What also impressed me immensely was when the minister was able to recognize two of his 15,000 congregants instantaneously. After the service, we learned about the history of the church which was extremely fascinating. We then hopped on the bus ready for another great experience.

With the exception of a few erotic art lifters, we helped scrape, prime, then paint the house of a U.S. veteran. Although I finished the job with completely ruined clothes, this was probably my highlight of the trip. Performing this enjoyable act of community service was fulfilling beyond words, and having done it amongst my peers, I can say it was an experience I won't forget. The Rice-Houston Hillel was a cool place, as we met some very chill students and played some pretty serious games of pool.

Finally, the last thing we did in Houston was help out at the Wheeler Avenue Church community event. It was there where I met a retired art teacher, whom I spoke with about his impressive drawings and how he was able to make them. Through conversing for over an hour, we got to know each other personally. We talked about an array of topics including sports,

school and family. By the end of the day, he gave me a bundle of colored pencils and paper. It was a magnificent way to cap off a terrific trip.

Meeting Michael Duke was a privilege and I thank him immensely. Because of him, I learned so much about the city of Houston. His article in the Jewish Herald really spoke about the true quality of the people who came on this trip. The trip was such a rewarding experience in large part to them. I would like to thank Brian, Abbe, and of course, Micah. Each one of them brought positive energy with them and it went along way in making this trip special. I would also like to thank the people at the Hilton Garden Inn for their hospitality and convenient location. Last but not least, I would like to thank Everett and Sam from the Moishe House. They were such cool people and they also contributed in making this trip such a memorable experience.