

J-Teens In The D

East Coast Jewish teens accomplish tikkun olam trip to Detroit.

Rachel Kleinhandler and Haley Rogers
Special to Teen2Teen

We never knew that spending a few days in a new city would have such a meaningful and lasting impact on us. This was most certainly applicable to our experience in Detroit.

J-Teen Leadership, based in Westchester, N.Y., is a teen-led Jewish community service organization that allows teens to participate in meaningful service projects, both locally and nationally. We were fortunate enough to commemorate Martin Luther King Jr. Day by spending the weekend in Detroit, doing acts of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) and experiencing the culture of the thriving Detroit of the past and the new Detroit of today.

We spent time with the fellows at Repair the World and the teens at PeerCorps, who shared their passion and love for their city. It was incredible to see how the decades of urban decline, so prevalent in Detroit, did not allow the spirits of the community members to be let down. We were surrounded by individuals with such positive attitudes and hope, they became instantly infectious. This was so encouraging and made the service work we did even more worthwhile.

One aspect of the trip that we found most meaningful was spending time with the third- and fourth-graders at the Bagley Elementary School in Detroit. They were all so determined to make a difference in their city and live out their dreams — ideals they shared with Martin Luther King Jr. Witnessing the enthusiasm of the kids gave us even more reasons to become a part of the community that weekend and make a difference, no matter how small.

Another powerful experience we had over the course of the long weekend was when we visited a church. Their congregants were so incredibly welcoming of us and made us feel like a part of their family. This kind of experience allows us to take a step back and recognize the importance of acceptance of others in the work to



J-Teen Leadership participants with teens from Breakers Covenant Church in Detroit painting a mural together.



J-Teens enjoy the famous Detroit auto show.

overcome adversity. Interfaith work is a major part of what J-Teen is, and we were able to showcase this while attending church that Sunday morning. We were able to gain a whole new perspective on issues such as civil rights and racial inequality and were inspired by the strength and resilience of those who've faced issues of inequality in their lifetimes.

Over the course of the trip, we gained a deeper understanding of the history of Detroit and got to hear stories from many members of the community, where a common theme was believing in your dream and making it a reality. We truly hope that we will be able to take these lessons back to New York and, hopefully one day, have the opportunity to go back to Detroit and witness the improvements made over time! We'd like to thank everyone who so kindly and generously welcomed us into their community and gave us the experience of a lifetime. □

Eleventh-graders Rachel Kleinhandler of Rye Brook, N.Y., and Haley Rogers of Yonkers, N.Y., are Leadership Circle members of J-Teen Leadership.

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