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## New Jersey teens make friends in Nashville, help repair flood-damaged homes

Posted on: December 4th, 2011 by The Jewish Observer

By Kathy Carlson

On the back deck of a house near Opryland on a warm fall day, several teens talk country music with a young mother holding her baby son. The teens sport kippot; she wears a silvery cross on a chain necklace.



Michael Abelev takes a turn with power drill to repair a flood-damaged deck as Rabbi Josh Kahn in background and Jacob Smalkin (right) look on.

The teens, all high school students from New Jersey, have come to Nashville with two rabbis to help repair homes damaged in the May 2010 flood that brought more than a foot of rain and millions in damage across Middle Tennessee.

Ten of the group of 17 boys attend Torah Academy of Bergen County; the others attend four different public schools. All are active in New Jersey NCSY, the Orthodox Union's international youth program. They were in Nashville from Nov. 9-13 and worked with Southeast Nashville Flood Recovery on homes in Antioch and the Pennington Bend area.



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The Jewish disaster relief group Nechama put the NCSY group in touch with Southeast Nashville Flood Recovery, said Rabbi Ethan Katz of New Jersey associate regional NCSY director, who led the group with Rabbi Josh Kahn of Torah Academy.

The New Jersey group spent Shabbat at Congregation Sherith Israel with Rabbi Daniel Levitt, walking to shul from the Holiday Inn Vanderbilt while Commodores fans walked to Vanderbilt Stadium for a football game. On Saturday night the group played laser tag and took in downtown Nashville. It was a first trip to Nashville for most of them.

“Nashville is beautiful,” Katz said. “The people are so nice.”

Alex Mabe, a senior at Matawan High School, worked with Jacob Smalkin, Roger Blumin and Michael Abelev to rebuild the deck on Jennifer Griffith’s house. “Thank you so much,” she told the teens, holding 10-month-old son Easton.

In May 2010, she and her son made it out of their house as water from the Cumberland River was reaching her calves, she said. It took about four months to be able to move back into the house, she said. The New Jersey teens have helped to restore the outside of the house – projects like repairing the rainsoaked deck, washed-out driveway and front steps that became useless after they sank into the mud. Those jobs took a back seat to repairing the interior and getting the family back into the house, she said.

Her house wasn’t in a flood plain, so there was no flood insurance, she said. FEMA grants helped, and she is thankful for volunteers who donated labor.

Taking a break from the deck work, the teens and Griffith found they both like Toby Keith and Brad Paisley, though there was a difference of opinion on Taylor Swift.

Katz has been directing the leadership missions since the program’s beginning.

“We have a responsibility to help others in need — Jews and non-Jews alike — and to make this world better than the day before,” he said in a written statement. “These students are not afraid to get down-and-dirty to help strangers or to share their joy of Torah in distant Jewish communities.”

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