

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT KATRINA: AS THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR APPROACHES,
NJ NCSY PREPARES TO HIT THE ROAD TO COMMUNITIES IN NEED

By Batya Graber

For **Rabbi Ethan Katz**, Assistant Regional Director of New Jersey NCSY, based in Teaneck, the response to the term “national disaster” does not simply mean to follow up in a community after the effects of a physical storm – it means preparing for the disaster before it even occurs. Rabbi Katz has travelled across the country with a team of small but mighty top-quality high school leadership students, from both public and *yeshiva* high schools. These teenagers are empowered to be “a light unto the nations” as they really get down and dirty. Concurrently, the **New Jersey NCSY** team will spend time with the local Jewish community for Shabbat, or Jewish schools to *m’chazek* (strengthen) the students.

From **New Orleans** and **Galveston, TX** recovering from hurricanes; to **Atlanta** with floods; and all the way up north to **Buffalo, NY**, to repair housing stock, Rabbi Katz has already led more than 130 Jewish teenagers over the last few years. He led six missions alone in 2010, with four other missions in development for the upcoming school year. Many of these trips have been coordinated with **NECHAMA: Jewish Response to Disaster**, an organization that provides direct support to communities recovering from natural disasters.

Rabbi Yaakov Glasser, Regional Director of New Jersey NCSY, declared, “Our *chessed* (acts of loving kindness) missions and *tikkun olam* (making the world a better place) trips empower Jewish teens to make a meaningful and lasting impact on the world around them. We are providing the only program that brings together Jewish teens from across the spectrum of affiliation with the common experience of giving of themselves. For many of our parents, fighting for Soviet Jewry and activism for other causes was formative in the development of their Jewish identity. These trips afford Jewish teens the opportunity to make a real difference in the world around them.”



New Jersey NCSY students volunteer with Habitat for Humanity in Buffalo.

Rabbi Katz and his teenagers often return to areas in need of consistent and on-going assistance, such as New Orleans and Galveston, in addition to preparing for potential national disasters. Like first responders who train to be ready at early notice, they are prepared to go on the road when the calamity occurs. Ideally, Rabbi Katz would prefer to have a disaster response rotation of students established in which teams of trained students would be able to leave within a few days notice of a disaster striking.

Going South to Bring Healing:

Recalled Rabbi Katz, “We were down in Galveston a week after Hurricane Ike hit. At that point, all the motels had been booked with people who lost their homes. We were given the task of helping to clean out existing homes that had been damaged beyond repair. To imagine, just days earlier a family lived there which now was one of the many we saw sleeping in the parking lots. It was an extremely emotional trip.”

Ely Shestack, of **Bergenfield**, then a sophomore at the **Torah Academy of Bergen County** clearly remembered the reaction of the owner of the home in Texas to which they had been assigned to dismantle when they arrived. “We felt part of a larger global community and it was an amazing feeling to walk away at the end of each day seeing what we had accomplished.”

In February 2009, students spent time building and repairing houses in New Orleans with **Habitat for Humanity**, a strong presence since Katrina struck in late summer 2005. Other student projects there included visiting a residence for seniors and running educational programs at a local Jewish day school. The group spent Shabbat at the Orthodox Union member **Congregation Beth Israel** synagogue, helping to make the *minyan* while filling the shul with youthful spirit and enthusiasm. Friday night included a festive *oneg* at the home of Beth Israel's **Rabbi Uri Topolosky**, and shared Shabbat lunch with the community before returning to New Jersey on Sunday.



New Jersey NCSY students with *yeshiva* children of New Orleans.

Andrew Israeli, of **Livingston**, then a senior at **Rae Kushner Yeshiva High School** was one of the ten student volunteers for that trip to The Crescent City. "I jumped at the opportunity to be part of this experience. I knew this would be an amazing opportunity to reach out, Jews helping non-Jews, to be a *Kiddish Hashem* (sanctification of God's name)," he declared.

Philip Katz, of **Fairlawn**, then a sophomore at **Northern Highlands Regional High School**, travelled to Atlanta in October 2009 following a flood only a few weeks earlier. The fifteen students were responsible for cleaning out rooms, removing flooring, and dismantling drywall, in addition to sweeping and power washing floors. "As a result of our efforts, not only were we able to feel enormously positive for helping complete strangers with their homes, but we also received the opportunity to be ambassadors for the Jewish people," he declared.

Qualifications for Participants:

Student participants are chosen by their schools based on various qualities: scholastics, character development, leadership potential and essay content. Students attend training seminars before the trip, covering topics such as the concept of what a person's own responsibility is to mankind and the country in which they live; the Jewish ideals of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world; and responses to expect from non-Jews unfamiliar with Jewish clothing or ways of life.

"People are curious who these teens are when we walk into places such as Wal-Mart in the middle of nowhere, or fly with airline flight attendants who don't know what it means to be an Orthodox Jew," declared Rabbi Katz. "Our NCSYers are a tremendous *Kiddish Hashem*, able to confidently explain what are *kippot* and *tzitzit*, our organization and why we have come to help."

Not even cold weather dissuaded these youth from volunteering in Buffalo with Habitat for Humanity and brought warmth to the local Jewish community last fall. Bundled up, the NCSYers spent two days assisting in rebuilding homes in downtown Buffalo: nailing wood into walls, painting shingles, sawing wood, carrying sheet rock, and stuffing insulation into walls. In addition, they spent Shabbat with local public school students and members of the **Upstate New York NCSY Region**; ran educational programs based upon that week's Torah portion at the local Jewish school, **Kadimah School**; and held a festive get-together for the residents of **Weinberg Campus**, an assisted living home in **Amherst, NY**.

Former Regional President of New Jersey NCSY **Victoria Bell**, of **West Orange**, and student at **Kushner**, was a volunteer in Buffalo and New Orleans. "We weren't just high school students. We were fun and exciting, and we made Judaism fun and exciting."



New Jersey NCSY students prepared special programming for students at the Kadimah School in Buffalo.

During their volunteer mission, the students were given journals in order to collect their thoughts and to be able to remember what they were experiencing. Debriefing sessions were held each day to help the teenagers cope with the intensity of their interactions. Following the trip, these journals help serve as a reflection.

Mitchell Liebman, of **West Orange**, and student at **Kushner**, was part of the New Orleans team in February 2009, wrote in his journal, “Each time I set foot into a shul, I close my eyes and attempt to envision what the shul in New Orleans was like during Katrina. Whenever I recite *Achienu* (a prayer to unite and protect the brotherhood of the Jewish people), I close my eyes and think about my brothers and sisters who lost their *beit kneset* (synagogue). When I *daven* (pray), I think of New Orleans and hope that one day it can get back on its feet.”