

# Ma'ayanot high school girls roll up their sleeves to help flood victims

## Ma'ayanot delegation lends a hand in Minnesota

Lois Goldrich • Local | World

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*A team from Ma'ayanot High School spent five days helping flood victims in Minnesota. Top row, from left, Miriam Apter, Julie Schwartz, Ilana Weinberger, Emily Blumenfeld, Chani Dubin, Racheli Weil, Daniella Steinreich, Daniella Meyer, Eileen Schwartz, and Chani Colton. Bottom, from left, Rebecca Lipschitz, Natali Moyal, Gali Sadek, Molly Brodsky, and local residents. COURTESY MA'AYANOT*

Seeing physical devastation up close is painful — but helping the victims of disaster rebuild their lives is rewarding, say 12 Ma'ayanot students who recently returned from Minnesota.

The girls, 10th- and 11th-graders at the Teaneck high school, spent five days helping flood victims in Oronoco Park. The city, severely damaged in October by overflow from the Zumbro, a tributary of the Mississippi River, has yet to recover.

“I was surprised when we got there because the flood happened in October and there are still so many people left on their own to finish [salvaging] their own houses. It’s sad,” said Daniella Steinreich, a sophomore who participated in the cleanup. “The other organizations have all gone home.”

“You learn to appreciate your house and everything you have,” said junior Daniella Meyer, who spoke with people there who had lost all their belongings. “And to appreciate where you live,” added Emily Blumenfeld, another junior, who said she’s happy not to live in a flood zone.

Ariella Steinreich, Ma’ayanot’s community service coordinator, said the girls participated in the mission under the auspices of NCSY, the international youth movement of the Orthodox Union. For the past two years, New Jersey NCSY has taken all-boys’ and coed groups to sites of natural disasters, such as New Orleans and Galveston, Texas, or they have done urban renewal work in places such as Buffalo.

“But this is the first NCSY all-girls team sent to assist in relief work,” said Steinreich.

“Each student was selected based upon her own merits,” said Rabbi Ethan Katz, New Jersey NCSY associate regional director, before the girls left for Minnesota. “This is not a class field trip,” he added, noting that the girls would be given meaningful work, “often demanding, and open to schedule changes due to what is deemed most beneficial for the communities in need. It is a disaster relief mission — a chesed mission.”

For this trip, the Orthodox group worked with Nechama: The Jewish Response to Disaster, a Minnesota-based organization that provides and coordinates volunteer assistance to communities in need.

Accompanying the students were Katz, NCSY chapter advisor Miriam Apter, Ma’ayanot Talmud teacher Rabbi Zev Prince, and school athletic director Eileen Schwartz.

While in Minnesota, the girls not only helped repair homes but also participated in the Susan G. Komen for the Cure 5K Walk held on May 8

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in Bloomington. On Shabbat, they visited with peers from the local Jewish community.

Sophomore Molly Brodsky said she was most moved by the group's experience at Mary's Place, a shelter that houses both adults and children.

"The children ran to us and asked to play games," she said. "One kid was crying and asked if we could stay for one more game. They weren't used to seeing teenagers from the outside world."

Racheli Weil, also a sophomore, was struck by the turnout at the breast cancer walk.

"There were about 50,000 people," she said. "It was amazing."

"It meant a lot [to be] representing Jewish women," Molly added. "There were church organizations there but our group was different, and people noticed. They saw Jewish girls marching and that we really do care."

"A lot of them hadn't met Jews before," said Daniella Steinreich. "It's important that we got to make a first impression as Jews and show how much we like to help other people."

Molly said she was impressed by the local Jewish community.

"They're the nicest people I ever met in my entire life," she said. "We ate Shabbat dinner and they asked about our lives and said that what we're doing is great. Everyone said hello. It's such a close-knit community and so caring."

"It was beautiful," said sophomore Ilana Weinberger of the time spent in Minnesota. "We helped other people, but we also helped ourselves as individuals."

"How many times do you get to go to the middle of nowhere and help people rebuild their lives?" echoed Weil.

"They've been home less than 24 hours and their friends are looking up to them as peer role models," said the school's community service coordinator on Monday. "They went above and beyond."

Steinreich said she was grateful for the support Ma'ayanot had given to the project and to NCSY "for giving us this opportunity."

Ma'ayanot girls are obligated to engage in eight community service projects each year, said Steinreich, explaining that she compiles an annual listing of service opportunities in the students' hometowns.

"But there's so much enthusiasm," she said. "Some girls do between 10 and 20 projects, some between 20 and 35, and some are hitting 50. It's really nice how the girls really embrace it and look forward to it."

While the Minnesota trip has been in the works for about two years, Ma'ayanot girls have had many other opportunities to be of service to the community.

"We have a weekly homework club called Pay It Forward," said Steinreich, noting that some 60 of her students help tutor children from the local elementary school. "We're so happy to have a program like this, that gives back to the community. We look forward to extending the borders of community service."

"One of the things the school teaches is that being a good community member is important to the future of Judaism," she said. "We're really proud that we're training future leaders."