

'Getting dirty doing good'

NCSY volunteers help clean up from the storm damage in Colorado

JUNE GLAZER

In mid-September, torrential rains caused such severe flooding in parts of Colorado that it prompted federal emergency declarations in 15 counties throughout the state.

Hardest hit was Boulder County, where homes were destroyed, roads washed away and vital infrastructure damaged. Residents there were told they would be displaced for up to six months.

Recently, members of the Bergen County chapter of National Council of Synagogue Youth returned from a mission to Boulder County, where they assisted flood survivors with storm-debris cleanup and mucking out damaged homes. The mission, the 22nd in five years undertaken by NCSY chapters in New Jersey for disaster relief, took 14 youths to Lyons, Colo., for four days last month. There they partnered with Nechama, the Jewish response volunteer organization, and "got dirty doing good,"

according to Rabbi Ethan Katz, New Jersey NCSY's regional director.

"People ask me why disaster relief. There are two main reasons," said Rabbi Katz, who conceived of the missions program after Hurricane Katrina and has sent more than 300 teens from five state chapters to help in communities in Louisiana, Alabama, Texas, Minnesota, New York, and parts of New Jersey.

"We view ourselves as ambassadors of the Jewish people, here to help regardless of whether it is Jews or non Jews who need it," he said.

"Second, most of our teens live insular lives, and have never seen poverty or devastation. They have never gotten down and dirty to help out. So, when kids go on these trips and a homeowner tells them how much he or she appreciates their help, they walk away knowing they made a real difference in somebody's life. It's a life-changing experience for them."

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NCSY students got their hands dirty in Colorado. Here, in the doorway, Michael Feuerstein-Rudin and Matthew Wexler; in the middle, Judah Stiefel, Yosef Naor, and Rami Levine, all from Teaneck; and, kneeling, Phillip Seidman of Marlboro and Yoni Schwartz of Teaneck take a work break in front of a house they are helping to repair.

Local

Getting dirty

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The 14 boys who participated in the Colorado mission – 10 are students at Torah Academy of Bergen County and four attend Teaneck, Marlboro, and Freehold Boro high schools – arrived in Lyons on October 20, accompanied by Rabbi Rael Blumenthal, director of the Bergen County NCSY chapter. Lyons is some 15 miles north of Boulder. It experienced the worst of the September storm damage – up to 17 inches of rain fell there in two days – and power and running water still have not been restored.

“Our worksite was a small house that had already been gutted and is now a shell,” Rabbi Blumenthal said, explaining that the group’s assignment was to remove mud from under the floor beams to recreate the crawl space where new plumbing and electrical supply lines had to be installed.

“It was crazy,” said Matthew Wexler of TABC. “We went into the house next door, and there was literally five feet of mud all the way up the refrigerator. Everything

was covered in mud. At a trailer park a couple of blocks away, all the trailers were upended and trees had speared through them.

“This was the first time I’ve seen destruction like this firsthand. I really wanted to help these people get back on their feet.”

Rabbi Blumenthal reported that over the course of three days the boys wheeled out buckets and buckets of mud and debris from their worksite to the curb for collection. “At one point it started to rain, but despite the cold and damp, they persevered and continued even when other volunteers called it a day,” Rabbi Blumenthal said, noting that the homeowner was someone who could not afford the cost of paying workers to do the job. “The boys did excellent work. The homeowner was humbled and grateful.”

“What we did was take a person with no house, no hope, and no place to turn and give him all three,” said Judah Stiefel of TABC. “With every shovel of mud and stroke of hammer, we didn’t just take a step toward the reconstruction of

someone’s home, but also a step toward rebuilding his life.”

In addition to mud removal, the boys took down two sheds and helped dismantle a wing of a house that was uninhabitable.

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RABBI ETHAN KATZ

“It was a very meaningful experience for me because at TABC I’m the head of chesed. But this was a totally different kind of chesed,” said Michael Feuerstein-Rudin. “At TABC, our projects are small in comparison to what we did in Lyons. There, we

all pitched in and made a difference. And because we all worked together, we got so much more done. I loved it, and I’d love to go back and do it again.”

Matthew Wexler feels the experience changed him. “First, I learned that we can help one another regardless of where we come from,” he said. “Also, I understood that we can never anticipate what’s going to happen to us, but like the people in Lyons who had their lives ripped apart, we can accept it and deal with it. That is their attitude and I found it really inspiring,” he said.

It’s a lesson Rabbi Katz hopes all his NCSY volunteers learn.

“There is no training for certain things that happen in life, and although there is nothing you can do about the storms that may come your way, what matters is how you handle them in the aftermath,” he said. “That’s what we want our kids to internalize.”

“There are two ways to view bad things that happen: as destruction or as an opportunity for rebirth. We want our kids to understand that, no matter what life throws at you, you can weather it.”