

Local teens provide disaster relief in Atlanta

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Jeffrey Berger, Rabbi Josh Kahn, and Ezra Chefitz serve food to the homeless.

Living in Rex, Ga., Pastor Willie Brown doesn't have occasion to meet Jewish people — let alone teenage boys wearing skullcaps. But after flooding damaged his home and its basement church, 15 Orthodox high school students from New Jersey dug up his soggy floor tiles, sanitized his moldy walls, and brought his



Andy Epstein, Phil Katz, Moshe Zharnest, Erez Dadon, and Shai Berman flank one of the breakfast customers.

salvaged furniture back inside.

The experience will likely affect the Christian clergyman's image of Jews for the rest of his life, said Rabbi Josh Kahn, director of student activities at Torah Academy of Bergen County.

TABC selected 10 students for the Oct 21 to 25 service trip, joined by five members of the National Conference of Synagogue Youth, the Orthodox Union's youth arm.

“In previous years, we sent students to do disaster relief in New Orleans and Texas,” said Kahn. “We’re trying to make an annual mission in partnership with NCSY. This is a way for our combined student bodies to see their ability to make an impact on someone else’s life beyond the immediate area.”

It was also a way to cultivate participants’ leadership skills and to foster fellowship between the yeshiva students and the NCSY members, most of whom attend public schools. Kahn accompanied the group along with NCSY advisers Moshe Zharnest and Yechiel Schaffer of Fair Lawn.

The project was coordinated and directed by Nechama, a non-denominational Jewish disaster response organization based in Minnesota. Nechama personnel briefed the boys when they reached Georgia, stressing that their visibility as Jews carried the potential for a uniquely positive impression.

Brown’s home was one of three the young men worked on. “We had to take out all his things in order to dig up the floor, and then bring everything back afterward,” said Kahn. “He was extremely friendly to us, and as he was going through his belongings, choosing what he wanted to keep and what could be discarded, that helped us think about our priorities in life as well.”

Sammy Schwartz, a TABC floor-hockey team member from Teaneck, said he almost passed up the trip because it meant missing a key game. But after discussing the opportunity with his coach and his parents, he decided to go — and has no regrets.

“I learned how much one little mitzvah can do,” said Schwartz. “I thought we did things that might not make such a big difference, but after seeing people’s reactions, and how thankful they were, I realized how much it meant to them.”

Senior Seth Feuerstein-Rudin of Teaneck helped document the mission for a video to be shown to the entire TABC student body. “One of the homeowners told us that after the flooding she had to be rowed back to

her house in a boat, and she started bawling while telling the story,” he said. “At the end, she told us, ‘Thank you so much — it means so much that someone is looking out for me.’ It made a huge impression on us and that she saw Jews, teenage boys, doing these things for her.”

Kahn said that another homeowner commented, “We see so many stories of teenagers getting in trouble. The reporters always seem to catch those stories. But where are the newspapers to see this group come from New Jersey to help a woman they never met before?”

Rabbi Eitan Katz, director of NCSY’s North Jersey region and coordinator for six service missions in the past three years, said the five participants were prepared for their journey in after-school sessions about tikkun olam (“fixing” the world), anti-Semitism, and Jewish and non-Jewish life outside the New York metropolitan area.

“They got a feeling of what it means to actually help other human beings, contribute to the human race, and care about someone besides yourself whether they’re Jews or not,” said Katz. “When you work side by side with people whose houses were destroyed, you can be sure the effects go on for years to come. They will tell their grandchildren about these kids who came out of nowhere to help.”

The NCSY volunteers included Erez Dadon, a senior at Fair Lawn High School; Phil Katz, a junior at Northern Highlands High School; Avi Steinbach, a senior at Paramus High; Brian Steinberg, a Teaneck 12th-grader at Solomon Schechter High School of West Orange; and Benjy Stokar, a Teaneck High senior.

The other TABC volunteers included juniors Shimmy Auman, Jeffrey Berger, Amiad Callen, Ezra Chefitz, Yosie Friedman, and Shua Katz, and seniors Shai Berman and Andy Epstein.

On the final day of the mission, the boys volunteered with an Atlanta organization that brings meals to the homeless in a parking lot. “For some of them, that was the most powerful part of the experience,” said Kahn.

While a few boys served, the others socialized with those who had come

for a meal.

“We were all surprised at how polite and thankful they all were,” said Schwartz. “One man noticed the [star of] David necklace my friend was wearing, and he said that sometimes you can be down like the bottom point and sometimes you’re up like the top point. He told us that right now he’s at the low point but he wants to get back to the top.”

Kahn said the mission was heavily subsidized in order not to restrict it to students who could afford the airfare and accommodations. “We see it as an investment in developing leaders, something both our organizations are committed to doing,” he said. “When these young men hear about a tragedy in the future, they might think, ‘What can I do to help?’ They will know that their actions made a difference in the lives of three people.”