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MOST POPULAR

'Getting dirty doing good'

NCSY volunteers help clean up from the storm damage in Colorado

June Glazer • Local | World
Published: 15 November 2013



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.

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.

Praying while female at the Kotel Women of the Wall representative to speak locally

Joanne Palmer • 17 April 2015
Local | World

What's going on with the Women of the Wall now?

What's happening with gender equality and pluralism in Israel, now that the Israeli election is over?

Women of the Wall, made up of women from across the Jewish spectrum, has fought for the right to pray at the Kotel — Jerusalem's Western Wall, the symbolic center of Jewish life, the magnet that draws observant and non-observant Jews, non-Jews, poets, and often even skeptics, close to it, as if they were pure iron filings.

The group, which was formed in the late 1980s, has been bolstered by legal wins. Its most important recent victory was the April 2013 decision by Judge Moshe Sobel of the Jerusalem District Court, who ruled that the city police were wrong when they arrested five women for the crime of wearing tallitot at the women's section of the Kotel.

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'Oy vey, my child is gay' Orthodox parents seek shared connection in upcoming retreat

Joanne Palmer • 27 March 2015
Local

Eshel, a group that works to bridge the divide that often separates lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews from their Orthodox communities, is holding its third annual retreat for Orthodox parents of those LGBT Jews next month.

Although most of its work is done with Orthodox LGBT Jews — who may or may not be the children of the parents at the retreat — the retreat offers parents community, immediate understanding, the freedom to speak that comes with that understanding, the chance to learn, and the opportunity to model healthy acceptance.

"There are particular issues to being Orthodox and having a gay child, although it varies a lot from community to community," Naomi Oppenheim of Teaneck said. "You worry about what the community is thinking about you. Someone — I don't remember who — said, 'When my kid came out, I went into the closet.'"

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Twenty years later Stephen Flatow remembers his murdered daughter Alisa

Joanne Palmer • 9 April 2015
Local

When you ask attorney Stephen Flatow of West Orange how many children he has, his answer is immediate.

"I have five children," he says.

Not surprising. What father doesn't know how many children he has?

And how are they doing?

"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."

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.

"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

Four of them are flourishing; they are all married and all parents. Mr. Flatow and his wife, Rosalyn, have 13 grandchildren, and another one's on the way. (And three of the Flatows' children live in Bergen County.)

But the fifth, his oldest, Alisa, was murdered by terrorists when she was 20; her 20th yearzeit was last week. She has been dead as long as she was alive.

"Just because she isn't there now, that doesn't mean I'm not her father," he said. "I just don't have any recent pictures of her to show."

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RECENTLY ADDED

Israel launching drive to void Goldstone Report

Ron Kampeas and Marcy Oster | 4 April 2011
World

WASHINGTON — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel would launch an international campaign to cancel the Goldstone Report after its author, ex-South African Judge Richard Goldstone, wrote in an Op-Ed in the Washington Post that Israel did not intentionally target civilians as a policy during the Gaza War, withdrawing a critical allegation in the report.

Netanyahu said he had asked his security adviser, Ya'akov Amidror, to establish a committee focused on "minimizing the damage caused" by the report.

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Facebook and Zuckerberg does an about-face and deletes Palestinian page calling for a Third Intifada

Martin Barillas | 29 March 2011
World

Following widespread criticism, a Facebook page calling for a third Palestinian intifada against Israel was removed on March 29. On the Facebook page, Palestinians were urged to launch street protests following Friday May 15 and begin an uprising as modelled by similar uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan. Killing Jews en masse was emphasized.

According to the Facebook page, "Judgment Day will be brought upon us only once the Muslims have killed all of the Jews." The page had more than 340,000 fans. However, even while the page was removed, a new page now exists in its place with the same name, "Third Palestinian Intifada."

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Did heated rhetoric play role in shooting of Giffords?

Ron Kampeas • 10 January 2011
World

WASHINGTON — The 8th District in southern Arizona represented by U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords comprises liberal Tucson and its rural hinterlands, which means moderation is a must. But it also means that spirits and tensions run high.

Giffords' office in Tucson was ransacked in March following her vote for health care reform — a vote the Democrat told reporters that she would cast even if it meant her career. She refused to be cowed, but she also took aim at the hyped rhetoric. She cast the back-and-forth as part of the democratic process.

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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."



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