

March 1, 2007
11 Adar, 5767

Editorial Letters

International

Arts & Travel

Health & Lifestyles

Sports & Leisure

Education

Kids & Teens

Campus

Seniors

Books

Food

Community

Past Issues

Related Sites

Special Sections

Home

Features & Columns

High schoolers to help clean up New Orleans

By ANDY LEVY-AJZENKOPF
Staff Reporter

Sometimes the fire of tikkun olam burns so strong, not even a hurricane can blow it out.

And for 35 Toronto- and Ottawa-area high school students, aged 14 to 18, and their youth leaders and chaperones, a hurricane is exactly what they're about to confront.

From March 11 to 14, members of the Toronto B'nai Brith Youth Organization (BBYO) and United Synagogue Youth (USY) will volunteer in the New Orleans area, helping with property reclamation projects and restoring hope to people affected by Hurricane Katrina.

A joint initiative of the USY and BBYO, the volunteer mission, titled "Rebuild Homes, Rebuild Lives," will proceed under the guidance of the Michigan-based, non-profit National Relief Network (NRN), an organization dedicated to leading and facilitating student volunteer efforts in American disaster zones.

Ariel Greenbaum-Shinder, 24, regional director of youth activities for USY, expects that the trip will be emotional for everyone involved.

To prepare, two orientations for participants and their parents were held to educate them about the history of Katrina, to reassure parents that all precautions are being taken to provide security to the students, and to "hammer home" that this will not be a fun-and-games trip, Greenbaum-Shinder said.

USY staff also created an information handbook for participants to consult while in the Big Easy.

Its introductory remarks sound a note of caution for those embarking on this tikkun olam journey.

"The things you will see in the days to come will be difficult, to say the least. It is no easy task to see a community that was once alive and thriving, now completely destroyed, and with little life in it," the booklet warns.

The USY handbook also lists the following sobering facts about Katrina's legacy in the state: the official death toll in Louisiana is 976; missing persons number 2,500; and the federally declared disaster area encompasses 90,000 square miles.

According to Greenbaum-Shinder and Missy Korn, 24, program director for BBYO, everyone is up to the challenge ahead of them.

They added that both their organizations are eager to meet with their New Orleans chapters, which are still "getting back on their feet" after the disaster.

Both Korn and Greenbaum-Shinder believe the Canadians will come back with a renewed sense of chesed.

"It'll be a life-changing experience for our kids," Korn predicted.

Ryan Bernknopf, 23, program associate at BBYO, will be on the trip and seconds Korn's sentiment.

"I know it's going to be something for our participants to remember for years to come," he told the CJN. "I expect it to be really empowering. You see all this [coverage] on the news, but that never really shows the whole thing."

Scott Harding, NRN's executive director, can't overstate the significance of such trips to the residents of Louisiana.

"It's incredibly important," he said. "We want to get the word out... to all of Louisiana that help is still coming in."

Harding estimates NRN has devoted close to 95 per cent of its activities in the region since Katrina and notes there is still much work to be done.

"One of the areas we are now focusing on is St. Bernard Parish," Harding said, referring the Louisiana equivalent to a county. "The parish lost 26,000 homes. Every single house, church, synagogue, hotel... you name it, everything went under water within their county."

Harding believes it will take another year of work before his organization has done all it can in Louisiana.

Both the BBYO and USY have been fundraising to help offset the costs to their travellers – currently \$850 (US) for BBYOers and \$600 (US) for USYers.

While USY has done this mainly through its own internal channels, BBYO found a unique way to help defray the costs for its volunteers.

Bernknopf has scheduled an event for April 14 in which BBYO members hope to play the world's longest indoor floor hockey marathon.

The current record stands at 24 consecutive hours, held by a BBYO chapter in Edmonton.

Hopeful record breakers were issued a challenge to sell as many chocolate bars as they could, with the winners earning a spot on the floor hockey team.

All funds raised up to Feb. 23 went toward the New Orleans trip. Funds raised afterward are being directed toward "Shoot For A Cure," a charity for spinal cord injuries.

Support from the community for these events "has been just incredible," Bernknopf said.

Any late donations received by the BBYO specifically for the New Orleans trip will be used to further reduce participants' costs, Bernknopf added.

For details, e-mail info@bbyo.ca.



Ryan Bernknopf and Missy Korn

About CJN

Search

Talk to Us

To Advertise