



AMERICAN JEWISH SOCIETY FOR SERVICE

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Summer 2008 – Little Rock, AR & San Juan, TX

June 29 – Our volunteers arrived safely this afternoon and after being greeted at the airport by Nili, Jess, Hannah and Ezra and Steph, Anna, Evan and Alex, got settled into their new homes and began the fun job of getting to know each other!

In San Juan our group is living in a dorm that was originally built for the 2003 AJSS group, and is now used by volunteers working with the many organizations that serve the migrant worker community including our hosts, Proyecto Azteca and the Aztec Community Loan Fund. A photo of the 2003 AJSS group hangs on the wall and the relics of the original mezuzah that was hung in 2003 grace the door post. The group will be able to walk to work each day which is great, not only to save on gas and driving but also because our workday will begin at 7 am! (But we'll ease in slowly with an 8 am start on Monday!) In addition to the new home construction, we will be doing some renovation and rehabilitation of older Proyecto Azteca homes, planning some activities with kids who live in the colonia and assisting with a research project that is looking at the impact that having a home has on the social, economic and educational welfare of the homeowners. They will also get to know a lot about the immigration issues confronting the region and get to watch up close the way the issues play out among the various interest groups. Southeast Texas is also home to a minor league baseball team (Edinburg Coyotes), a minor league hockey team (Rio Grande Valley Killer Bees), a lot of exotic wild birds and Mexican-Texas cultural landmarks.

Up in Little Rock the work day will start at 7:30 and will be supervised by Habitat for Humanity's Over-the-Hill Gang who is looking forward to getting to know this summer's crop of hard working AJSSers! The group will begin work tomorrow with construction of a front porch and a carport for a new Habitat house and will then move on to framing of a new house. We'll also be working on some smaller renovation projects and at the Habitat ReStore. We are living on the grounds of the Western Hills United Methodist Church in a building that was once the Jewish Country Club of Little Rock. It was a stately building in its day and was reportedly designed by the same architect who built Little Rock's Central High School. We'll learn more about the history of this building as the summer progresses. Little Rock is pretty much in the center of the state and will give us lots of opportunity to travel to many of the beautiful state parks nearby. We'll also head to Memphis for a weekend and up to Fayetteville to see the University. And we'll explore many of Little Rock's treasures including Central High School, the Clinton Presidential Library and of course, the *little rock!*

July 9 – Greetings! As you probably all know, things in San Juan and Little Rock are busy and wet! Despite the rain the groups are doing a lot of inside work including spending time at the Arkansas Rice Depot, the Rio Grande Valley Food Bank and two different medical clinics. It turns out that these other community-based organizations spend time hoping for rain so they can benefit from our volunteer labor force! Eventually the sun (and the heat) will return and we'll get back on our more traditional work sites. But, one thing is for certain, an AJSS summer is about dealing with the unexpected and our workers are doing a great job at that!

On the recreational and cultural side of things, the groups are having a lot of fun. On the 4th of July, the San Juan group went to the Texas Cook-'Em BBQ and since then have gone bowling and ice skating (yes, in Texas, in July). They are having dinner tomorrow night with a group of Christian students from around the country doing mission work through a local church, saw a movie and presentation by Pastors for Peace and regularly take a dip in the local community pool! They also visited the Edinburg Public Library and learned about "walls" – the US immigration wall, the Berlin Wall, the Great Wall of China, etc. to better understand the history and controversies surrounding them.

Up in Little Rock the group spent the 4th of July weekend touring Central High School and the Clinton Library and Presidential Center. They watched the fireworks over the Arkansas River and visited a water park. They've gone bowling and visited the local farmer's market. This weekend the group is heading to the Ozarks for a folk music festival and other outdoor excitement, and tomorrow night the group will attend a local teen *improv* comedy night. We have already celebrated 2 birthdays and look forward to celebrating a few more before the summer is over.

And perhaps most importantly, both groups successfully survived their first laundry night with no disasters during the rinse or spin cycles!

Our first Shabbat services were a little damp in terms of weather but not spirit. The San Juan group celebrated with a festive dinner and is devoting each week to the study of a different prophet. The first week the group read the book of Jonah and this week they are learning about Deborah. In Little Rock the group's first Shabbat service was on the theme of acceptance and this week the focus is on rest and meditation. A Little Rock Kroger sells fresh Challah and our group celebrates Shabbat and Havdalah with guitar accompaniment.

July 21 – Greetings! I just returned from the best part of my job where to get to visit with our projects, get to know your kids and watch the summer fall into place. And I must apologize right up front that I don't have photos yet. I do hope to have some posted later this week and will send another email letting you know the minute they are there!

For those of you watching the weather channel and the course of tropical storm Dolly in the Gulf, please be assured that we are also keeping track of the storm and will take all necessary precautions.

Down in San Juan the group is working on a range of projects: Our host, Proyecto Azteca had long been looking forward to a renovation of their office quarters and our

volunteers are just the crew to help accomplish that job. In the spirit of helping our hosts, we ripped up and sanded floors, laid new tile, replaced molding and removed doors, varnished and hung new doors, and given the place a fresh coat of paint. Out on the construction lot we are doing various jobs to help get the houses finished. Everyone has learned the important (and sometimes boring) job of puttying holes to prepare a house for painting and caulking the seams and windows to keep out the elements. Several of our volunteers braved the heat and their fear of ladders and helped lay tile to complete the roof.

On the non construction front our group has also had the chance to volunteer in a medical clinic, interview new home owners, have a party with kids living in the *colonias* and in general get to know and interact with the greater community that we are serving this summer. And, we even helped the Jewish community of McAllen move into their newly built synagogue – a group of our kids helped move and unpack the Rabbi's library and were treated to lunch at a local Chinese restaurant!

Many other activities are filling up the summer including last weekend's trip to South Padre Island and this weekend's study of comparative religion with trips to a local mosque, Shabbat services and lunch at the new shul in McAllen and a Mass at the Catholic Basilica in San Juan. The group is working and living very well together and they all genuinely appreciate the sense of responsibility they have been given for the outcome of the summer and the success of the community they are creating.

Up in Little Rock, the group is busy working on several phases of new home construction as well. Habitat had begun work on several homes prior to our arrival and we have helped get them closer to occupancy. This has involved building a porch and carport, cleaning up the outsides and insides so the electricians and plumbers can do their jobs, assisting with digging a foundation and this week they will begin framing a new house. The Habitat for Humanity ReStore is another place that is utilizing the services of our volunteers as they rip up carpet and help move items around the warehouse to make them easier for folks to furnish their new homes. The work is certainly not all terribly glamorous but it is important and extremely helpful to our hosts.

The group is also going to be spending more time at the Arkansas Rice Depot where they will help the food bank stack and organize the donations it receives so they in turn can help families in need of help. Twice so far this summer our kids have joined Church pastor and several members of Western Hills United Methodist Church to feed homeless people and this week they are putting a fresh coat of paint on the Church. And last week we painted a beautiful mural on the school wing of a church.

The Little Rock group is doing a bit of traveling and this weekend they went to Memphis and visited the Civil Rights Museum, Graceland and other cultural hot spots. The kids were very moved by the museum and had a great discussion after their visit. They hosted a terrific BBQ last week for our Habitat for Humanity hosts. Next week they are heading up to Fayetteville and exploring the northwest corner of the state. Their Shabbat services are a great opportunity to reflect and take stock in what it's like to live together and serve those less fortunate. The group is working really well

together and as they move into the second half of the summer is taking more time to focus on their AJSS community and the community at large.