

Jewish Journal

Teens rebuild homes and hope through organization

By ERICA MORRIS
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

For some South Florida teenagers, summer break means lazy days of sleeping in, visiting friends and shirking responsibility. For those working with the American Jewish Society for Service, however, the summer is an entirely different thing.

The American Jewish Society for Service is a non-profit group that organizes international service projects for teens to participate in. This summer, 32 teens from across the country will help rehabilitate homes in Little Rock, Ark. and Johnson City, Tenn.

Ryan Schwartz, a Park-land resident and student at Stoneman Douglas High

School, is among the participants. Ryan is currently spending his six weeks of service in Tennessee.

"There's a wide range of teens participating, really, from all over," said Rena Convisor, executive director of American Jewish Society for Service. "It's a good representation of America's youth."

The participants are ages 16 to 18 and come from 12 different states, including Florida, New York and California. The trip commenced July 1, and the teens will return home Aug. 10.

"They spend a good deal of time away; for some, it's the first time away from home," Convisor said. "It's a great experience."



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Teens offer a helping hand.

This marks the 57th year that American Jewish Society for Service has hosted these projects. The program began in 1951, and since that time more than 2,500 teenagers have been involved, according to American Jewish Society for Service reports.

"We've had a lot of success with this program; a lot of teens want to help, and we're glad to help them find an avenue for that," Convisor said.

The participants are sent to impoverished areas and work with non-profit organizations local to that particular area. The program has sent helpers to 46 states, building playgrounds and parks and renovating homes.

This work is in the spirit

of *tikrun olam*, repairing the world, Convisor said.

While away, the teens live in churches, dormitories, schools and other community locations. The participants also observe Shabbat, conducting their own services and bonding over the experience.

The volunteers meet with city and state officials while away, and travel to recreation spots on the weekend. The goal is to create a well-rounded experience, Convisor said.

"Volunteering through community service is a very rewarding thing, not only for the people you help, but for yourself as well," said Lauren Fisher, 18, a Weston resident who is active in Habitat for Hu-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22

▼ TEENS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

manity International.

Habitat for Humanity is a non-profit organization that helps build shelters. Volunteers with the American Jewish Society for Service's program will work with Habitat for Humanity workers in Arkansas and Tennessee.

"When you get involved with community service at a young age, it becomes ingrained in you," Fisher said. "You become more likely to continue as you

get older."

This is the belief that keeps organizers at American Jewish Society for Service going strong, Convisor said.

"We hope that we're getting a message out," she said. "Showing kids that it can be fun and beneficial to help others. It's a great thing."

American Jewish Society for Service is located at 10319 Westlake Blvd., Suite 193, Bethesda, Md. Call 240-205-5940 or visit www.ajss.org for more information.