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At your service

A quiet organization makes some noise with its 'tikun olam' projects for teens

by Ron Kaplan
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In 1977, when other teenage friends were hitting the beach or flipping burgers, Jordan Sklar of Montclair spent the summer renovating homes in Springfield, Mass. The experience still holds fond memories.

"Some of the things that stand out for me were working with local teenagers renovating homes in an African-American neighborhood," Sklar recalled. "I also enjoyed the camaraderie of the volunteers and the enthusiasm and involvement of the group leaders. As a practical matter, I learned some useful hands-on skills about construction and home repair...that has served in good stead since."

Sklar is now able to pass that camaraderie and enthusiasm onto his son, Joshua, who will enter 11th grade at Montclair High School in the fall. This summer Joshua will participate in a similar project in Johnson City, Tenn., working on home renovation and rehab.

Both the father's and the son's ventures are projects sponsored by the American Jewish Society for Service, a 56-year-old organization showing new visibility as teens clamor to perform social service, whether to fulfill school requirements, boost their college applications, or, as in the Sklars' case, derive satisfaction by giving back to those less fortunate.

"I'm delighted that Josh is going on the same program," said his father. "I think it's fantastic and worthwhile to...help others."

Rena Convissor tells a similar story about her summer with AJSS in 1980. After her stint as a teen participant, the former South Orange resident returned as a counselor in 1984.

In September 2006, the AJSS board of directors — comprised

almost exclusively of former campers and counselors — named her the organization's first full-time executive director.

Since its inception in 1951, when AJSS helped build a single-family home for a disabled African-American veteran in an Indianapolis neighborhood, about 2,500 teens have completed 136 projects in 46 states as well as in Canada and Israel.

"In 1951, Jewish kids doing community service was almost unheard of," said Convissor in a telephone interview from her office in Bethesda, Md. "Today you can't graduate from high school without some number of hours of community service."

Over the years, scores of programs, both religious and secular, have been created to fill this niche. In order to keep up with the competition, Convissor said, the AJSS board "realized we need to professionalize AJSS and move it into the 21st century."

Convissor said the society was "primarily a word-of-mouth organization, and now we are expanding that."

Toward that end, she has sought to make her organization "much more collaborative with so many of the Jewish service organizations out there." The expanding world of Jewish service groups includes the Jewish Coalition for Service, American Jewish World Service, and the Foundation for Jewish Camping (see box).

This summer, 32 incoming junior and senior high school students from across the United States — including five from New Jersey — will participate in rehab projects in Johnson City and Little Rock, Ark.

"All of our work for 56 years has really been 'hammer-and-nails,'" said Convissor, who served as deputy director of the Center for the Advancement of Health in



Since its launch in 1951, teen participants in the American Jewish Society for Service summer program have completed more than 130 projects in 41 states.

Photo courtesy AJSS.org

Washington for 14 years. "We're not working with a local day care center; we're not working in a local soup kitchen — unless we're fixing it."

The students put in a full work-day during the six-week program. "This is a summer experience focused on doing community service," Convissor said. "On the weekends and in the evenings, we have recreational and cultural activities, really trying to take advantage of the communities that we're living in. When there's a Jewish community nearby, they interact with those folks and learn about [them] and have an opportunity to attend services if there's a synagogue nearby."

At six weeks, the AJSS program is longer than most similar efforts.

"One of the hallmarks of

AJSS is that it's an immersive experience and because of that it can be really transformational to the participants," Convissor said. "You can accomplish a lot with 16 enthusiastic workers in a six-week period. You can actually build a house start to finish, and we have. Unlike a camp that's two weeks long [and] where the campers have done great work, we can do great work times that much more time."

Joshua Sklar told *NJ Jewish News* that although he had been to camps before, this would be his

first time involved in such a community-based organization. He said he was looking forward to both the experience and carrying on a family tradition, and didn't mind being gently prodded in that direction.

"I probably would not have found out about [AJSS] if my dad hadn't been in it," he said. "He said he really enjoyed it, and it didn't sound too bad." ■

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Former South Orange resident Rena Convissor enjoys the best of both worlds: reliving her days as an AJSS teen volunteer while teaching a new generation of Jewish youth about *tzedaka* and *tikun olam*.

Photo courtesy Rena Convissor

Pitching in

The last decade has seen rapid growth among organizations offering service opportunities for Jewish teens and college students. Some of the more prominent include:

- **American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee**

www.jdc.org
JDC Jewish Service Corps
Ralph I. Goldman Fellowship
Roslyn Z. Wolf Cleveland-JDC
International Fellows Program

- **American Jewish Society for Service**

www.ajss.org

- **American Jewish World Service**

www.ajws.org

- **AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps**

www.avodah.net

- **The Bina Center**

www.tikunolamisrael.org
Tikun Olam in Tel Aviv

- **Brit Olam**

www.britolam.org
Apples and Honey

- **Camp Isabella Friedman**

www.isabellafreedman.org/adamah
ADAMAH: The Jewish Environmental Leadership Fellowship

- **Camp Tawonga**

www.tawonga.org/qt_israel.html
Teen Service Learning Trip to Israel

- **spark: partnership for service**

www.sparkpfs.org
Nitzotz (with BBYO)

- **United Jewish Communities**

www.ujc.org
www.otzma.org
Otzma (with the Jewish Agency for Israel)

A full list of such programs is at www.jewishservice.org, the Web site of the Jewish Coalition for Service.