

# AMERICAN JEWISH SOCIETY FOR SERVICE



Annual Report 2007-08



## Friends and Supporters,



The 58th summer of service and the year that surrounded it were full of mixed emotion for AJSS. Our successful projects in Little Rock, AR, and San Juan, TX, gave our volunteers the chance to put their Jewish values into action for people greatly in need of their services. The appreciative homeowners and community agencies that benefited from our work and the valuable experiences of our volunteers combined for a summer full of purpose and meaning. But, with happiness also came sadness. We lost two important people who gave so much to AJSS and whose memory will sustain us as we plan for the future.

The passing of Henry Kohn this September gave us the chance to reflect on the outstanding organization that he began almost 60 years ago; his devotion to giving young people the chance to serve those less fortunate is demonstrated every summer as AJSS carries out that mission. Henry gave his full support to the recent institutional changes made by AJSS and believed that they would help strengthen our program and our ability to serve more people and more communities. Henry's loss will be felt for a long time, but it affirms our commitment to carrying on his vision and building an even stronger program for future generations.

We also mourn the loss of Barbara Kohn Katz, Henry's daughter, who died in April. Barbara was an active and engaged member of our board for many

years, contributing her ideas to all aspects of the AJSS program, but especially keeping us focused on the social and emotional development of our teenage volunteers.

This summer marked a significant change in the way we staff our summer projects. This year we hired young Jewish educators to take charge of our projects. Our new staffing model of a Project Director and Assistant Director along with two counselors resulted in an innovative approach to our trips. The staff brought a wealth of expertise in experiential Jewish education, community service, Jewish values and activism to our program. Whether married or single, Jewish communal service professionals are the wave of our future.

We also made a commitment to make more explicit the link between our work and our Jewish values and practice. We designed an interactive and flexible curriculum to use for Shabbat and throughout the summer that addressed themes including tikkun olam, social justice and mitzvot. The curriculum included suggested readings (ancient and modern) and activities designed to challenge our volunteer's thinking and behaviors. In the descriptions of the projects you will read specific examples of how this worked on the ground. We were delighted to find that this emphasis was extremely well received by the volunteers and will serve as a model for future programs.


This coming year we are looking forward to expanding our reach by connecting to our alumni. AJSS has given more than 2,500 young people the chance to serve others and make the world a better place. Our country is facing difficult economic times, and the need for an AJSS service project will be great in many communities across the country. As of this writing, we are talking with several communities that hope that our projects will be a part of their important work in the summer of 2009.

As the cost of running an AJSS project continues to rise, we turn to you for your support and ask that you give generously this year. We rely on the support of our friends and alumni to help fund the portion of our program not covered by our volunteers' tuition. Please help support AJSS by giving young Jewish teens of today the chance to develop into the leaders of tomorrow. Take a moment to think about your connection to AJSS and give back to a program that influenced who you are and what you do today.

B'Shalom,



**Lawrence G. Green**  
Chair



**Rena Convissor**  
Executive Director



*Let us know where you are and what you are doing – join our Alumni Network through the Jewish Coalition for Service – go to [www.ajss.org/alums](http://www.ajss.org/alums) for details.*



# San Juan, Texas

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This was the second AJSS project in San Juan, Texas, and like our first visit in 2003, we lived in a dorm built for AJSS right on the grounds of Proyecto Azteca, our host agency. This time, however, we had a hurricane to contend with, and while it briefly interrupted our plans, it also gave us a chance to perform real tzedakah.

Proyecto is the model program for a statewide effort to provide help to residents of unincorporated neighborhoods, *colonias*, in building their own homes. At the center of Proyecto Azteca's work is its Self-Help Construction Program, where, at the end of four months of hard work, each family has built for itself, an 816-square-foot three bedroom, one bathroom wooden frame house that meets all building codes and standards.

The director of Proyecto Azteca, Ann Cass, learned her trade from Cesar Chavez and incorporates his most important tenet – self-determination, rather than charity – into Proyecto Azteca's mission of opportunity and self-sufficiency.

Our volunteers were involved in many phases of home building ranging from painting, caulking, roofing and varnishing. We banked over 900 hours, which were applied to the hours of participating families too elderly or sick to do the work themselves.

We also helped our hosts renovate their office quarters by ripping up and sanding floors, laying new tile, replacing molding, removing doors, varnishing and hanging news ones and giving the place a fresh coat of paint. As Rashi says, attend to those in need in your household before those in need in your town. And Proyecto Azteca certainly felt like home.

Beyond our work with Proyecto, we also volunteered in two medical clinics, hosted a party for the children of the *colonias*, planning games and serving food, and sorted donated clothes at a local church.

Before you build you have to destroy, and we helped a local church tear down the old community center whose foundation was cracked. We broke through dry-wall with sledgehammers and jackhammers, and Hurricane Dolly swept in and finished what we started. When the dust settled, we were treated to a fiesta by the community.

After Hurricane Dolly we formed "Relief Team Alpha." Led by our friend Pastor Bob of the San Juan Methodist church, we were the first people to distribute food, water, cleaning supplies, clothes and comfort to the residents of the flooded, ruined and overlooked *colonias*.

In addition to our labor, we did a lot of Jewish and interfaith learning this summer. We helped the

McAllen Jewish community move into their newly built synagogue, attended Bible study and shared community meals. We visited a local mosque on a Friday, went to shul on Saturday and to the local Catholic shrine on Sunday. In keeping with the founding philosophy of AJSS of prophetic Judaism, we selected a "Prophet of the Week," reading his or her story, discussing important passages, analyzing how they are portrayed in popular culture and connecting their teachings to our work.

We traveled quite a bit as well, visiting the tourist town of Progreso, Mexico, lounging on the beach of South Padre Island and of course driving up to Austin and San Antonio; we'll always remember the Alamo!

This summer we developed our abilities to listen and learn from other people's experiences and to share our own. We learned about immigration issues and how they affect the daily lives of people in this country. We learned that no matter how little some people have, they look out for others, too. We learned that people truly and deeply believe in God, and truly and deeply believe in the power of individuals to make a difference. We learned that there is always a reason for a fiesta. And we built solidarity and friendship with the people of the Rio Grande Valley.



*When a group of kids say "I don't want to spend my summer at sleep away camp, I want to help someone in need," it says such amazing things about being Jewish -- that there is a quality instilled in each of us that wants to help others.*

# Little Rock, Arkansas

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*Hastings-on-Hudson, NY*



For our return trip to Little Rock we were guests of the Western Hills United Methodist Church and lived in a building that in the 1930's served as the Jewish Country Club of Little Rock – a coincidence that exemplifies the ecumenical nature of AJSS.

Habitat for Humanity of Pulaski County served as our host agency but we also assisted organizations in the greater Little Rock area. Our Habitat work involved several phases of new home construction, including digging a foundation and framing the walls, building a porch and carport, and cleaning up newly built homes to prepare for electricity and plumbing. We helped at the Habitat ReStore and spent a lot of time at the Arkansas Rice Depot, the state's largest food bank, stacking, labeling and organizing donated food.

To show our appreciation for its generous hospitality, we also repaired the outside of the Western Hills UMC so that by the end of our stay, the entire front of the house had been stripped, sanded and freshly painted. Our painting skills were put to great use at Promise Land Church, where we painted several murals for a children's prayer room.

Our work efforts were complemented by weekly educational sessions. Being able to provide a Jewish context for our work promoted a great deal of discussion and healthy debate. Not only did we look at Jewish texts and other sources to find out what Judaism

teaches about the concept of *tzedek* and issues of hunger and homelessness, we also applied our findings to real-life situations. One of the most meaningful was when we joined members of Western Hills to feed a group of homeless people in downtown Little Rock. It gave us the chance to see what a difference our efforts made to these folks.

Our Friday evening Shabbat program was filled with *ruach* and reflection, and since we were often on the road during weekends, our creative Havdallah usually took place when we arrived "home" on Sunday evenings. Gathering outside in a circle, accompanied by the guitar, was a soothing way to end the weekend and get in the right frame of mind for another busy week!

We took advantage of being so close to a lot of tourist attractions in the region. In Little Rock we visited the Clinton Library, Central High School and a downtown area complete with farmer's market. But we also hit the road. We visited a state park dedicated to preserving the Ozark heritage and attended an evening performance of traditional Ozark folk music, which had a number of AJSS participants dancing and singing right up on stage along with the performers, and ate ice cream sundaes while enjoying an impromptu concert on the town square.

We also went to Memphis, TN, home of Elvis Presley and the blues! We walked down Beale Street to get a

real appreciation for the history of the blues and spent time at Graceland. Of course, no trip to Memphis would be complete without a visit to the Civil Rights Museum, which gave us a historical account of the movement and events leading up to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

There were many people who helped make this summer so memorable. Sylvia Nasic, the pastor of Western Hills UMC, along with Jim Hicks and David Wilson were so gracious in making sure our stay was comfortable. We also extend our thanks to Rita Fagan from the Jewish Federation of Arkansas who arranged for us to enjoy several pool parties and barbeques at the homes of members of the local Jewish community.

Our group began this summer as AJSS groups do -- as strangers, not knowing much about one another or about what to truly expect over the course of our six weeks together. We quickly bonded over the work, the challenges and the growth we all experienced after sharing this summer together.

Of most value, we learned that making a positive difference in the lives of others is what is truly important about *tikkun olam*. It did not always involve the most glamorous of tasks, but the sense of accomplishment we felt in helping to provide housing and food for others is what was most meaningful.



*So I am seeing that I cannot vote, I cannot give a lot of money, but I can still help people in such a way that I can help provide a home, a shelter and have that feeling of pride and accomplishment.*



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contribution to AJSS by  
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other estate planning.*



# Alumni Profile

## The Sherwin Family

I was fortunate enough to participate on an AJSS project in 1968, in Busby, Montana. We helped the Cheyenne Indians rebuild their homes and local rodeo grounds including repainting of the largest teepee in the world. My close group of 20 volunteers lived in an Indian school on the Cheyenne Reservation, and learned how to get along with each other and the community around us. The AJSS experience built character and integrity, not to mention physical strength and endurance. We all worked hard to make sure that we had a strong impact on the Busby community during our six weeks there.

In 2003, I rediscovered AJSS and all those wonderful memories came back to me. I remembered how special that summer was and wanted my children to share the same experiences that I had as a young Jewish adult putting my values into action to serve others.

My son, Jason (Rapid City, SD, 2003) defines his experience as one where he was able to give back to the community; something he had little experience with prior to the summer. He was also exposed to multiple social issues that still exist today. Two years later, his brother Jeffrey (Vancouver, BC, 2005) worked side-by-side with the people who were going to receive the homes built by the AJSS volunteers. This really helped him appreciate AJSS's contribution and made the project a much more personal experience. And this past summer (2008) my youngest son Greg spent the summer in San Juan, TX, building homes for low income migrant workers, being a first-responder after Hurricane Dolly and putting into practice the values of service and justice that have shaped my thinking and actions since that summer in 1968.

AJSS has given two generations of Sherwin's the chance to serve. We learned about ourselves and each other. We had the opportunity to experience communities very different from our own and we got to help make the world a better place. My hope is that my sons will have the chance to see their children participate in AJSS in the future.



# Statement of Financial Position as of December 31, 2007

## Assets

### Current Assets

Cash and cash equivalents	\$ 275,294
Prepaid Expenses	4,398
<b>Total Current Assets</b>	<b>\$ 279,692</b>

### Other assets

Office and computer equipment	\$ 1,767
<i>– net of accumulated depreciation of \$944</i>	
Investments — long term	670,948
<b>Total other assets</b>	<b>\$ 672,715</b>

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**Total Assets** **\$ 952,407**

## Liabilities

### Current liabilities

Accrued expenses	\$ 9,743
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**Total Liabilities** **\$ 9,743**

## Net Assets

Unrestricted	\$ 805,357
Temporarily Restricted	137,307

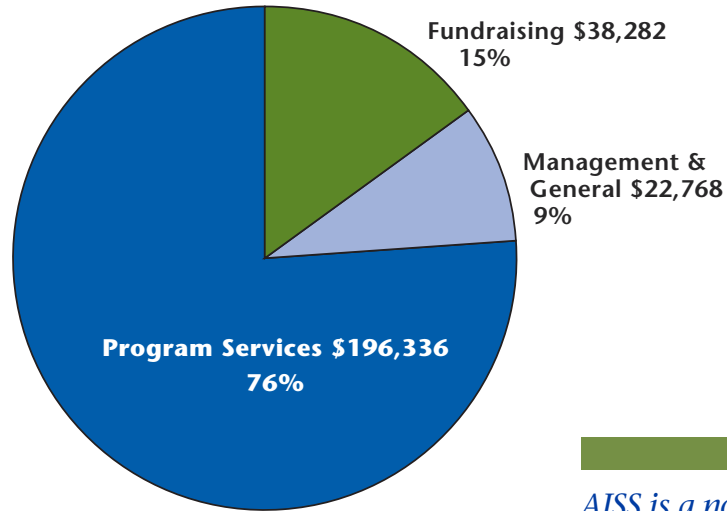
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**Total Net Assets** **\$ 942,664**

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**TOTAL LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS** **\$ 952,407**

## Schedule of Functional expenses for the year ended December 31, 2007



*AJSS is a non profit organization.*

*Donations are deductible for tax purposes.*

*A complete copy of financial statements audited by Metro Metro and Associates is available upon request from the American Jewish Society for Service, Inc.*

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