

Letter from the President

To Whom Much is Given, Much is Expected

[Editor's note: Roxanne Littner was elected President of Yachad at a meeting of the Board of Directors in June. Prior to the election, she served as Vice President. She succeeds Josh Weinberg, who becomes Immediate Past President.]

Rabbi Toby Manewith eloquently addresses the issue of what poverty looks like on page 2 of this newsletter. There is no doubt that all who engage in a tikkun olam project have been exposed to a situation that tempts them to pass judgment on the recipients of their efforts and support. My recommendation for dealing with this dilemma is to recall the saying: "To whom much is given, much is expected."

On first reflection, this quote reminds us that those among us having the good fortune to attain financial success have a responsibility to help provide for those less fortunate. In fact, a successful, peaceful community relies on such economic gestures.

But, "to whom much is given, much is expected" has a deeper meaning. Many of us had the good fortune to be born into a world of wholesome role models, peaceful neighborhoods, attentive teachers and available parents. These advantages provided us with safe homes, parental guidance, good educations and expansive world views. In turn, we become more compassionate, more understanding, and can make choices based on greater judgment and a healthy sense of self. These are, in fact, our greatest assets. Imagine what it might be like to be born into a home without these gifts.

continued on page 2

Kastner Family and Friends Celebrate Father's Day Repairing a Home; Performing a Mitzvah

Jason Kastner and his father Sam celebrated Father's Day this year by repairing and beautifying the home of a Washington grandmother, Sheila Brown.

Jason, a broker at the commercial real estate leasing firm of West, Lane & Schlager, organized the day and recruited his father, Sam, a partner in the Washington office of Holland & Knight; his mother and sister, and more than 50 colleagues and associates, family and friends to perform a Yachad Mitzvah Project.

"The project was truly a success. Many sons and daughters participated with their fathers (and mothers) to celebrate Father's Day," Sam Kastner said. "Ms. Brown, the homeowner, and her grandchildren assisted with the effort all day long. I think she was truly overwhelmed that so many people she didn't know came out to beautify her house, and her life."

continued on page 4



Sam Kastner (left) with daughter Marissa and son Jason, pause at Father's Day Mitzvah Project work on home of Sheila Brown.

Rabbi Manewith on What Poverty Looks Like

[Editor's Note: Rabbi Toby Manewith is Associate Rabbi at Temple Micah, a member of the Yachad Board of Directors, and a Sukkot in Spring volunteer]

I had come to the small house in Northwest Washington as part of Sukkot in April. I was there to paint, tile, spackle—whatever small part I could play to make the house habitable, perhaps even cozy. The first thing that I saw when I walked into the living room was a big screen TV. Like many of our volunteers, I was taken aback.

Forty-two inch screens don't fit with the picture that many of us have of poverty. Having grown up on stories of American-Jewish immigrant life and 1980's farm-crisis movies, my image of poverty has always included a family of seven or eight living in a one bedroom tenement apartment. When one thinks of poverty, the image that comes to mind is tattered sneakers not new cross-trainers; simple meals on chipped dishes, not expensive take out.

Poverty is complicated. A person might have stylish clothes because of a job that demands a suit. A family might own large electronics because they purchased them before a string of bad luck. Or maybe they received it as a Christmas gift. Perhaps they did make what I would consider a poor choice. But the few hundred dollars spent on some small luxury or escape would have made a very small dent in their economic situation had they chosen to spend it in a way an outsider might label "more wisely."

I don't have a big screen TV. On the other hand, there aren't leaks in my roof or cracks in my walls. My plumbing works. If these things need repair, I can call the front desk or easily buy the supplies I need. This cannot be said for the homeowners with whom Yachad works. If you look past the household item that has surprised—or even offended—you might see bare cupboards, lamps with no shades, rotted pipes, or a panoply of other indications that the residents meet standard poverty criteria and desperately need our help.

The great Jewish sage, Hillel, taught "Do not judge a person until you are standing in his place." (*Ethics of the Fathers* 2:5) His colleague, Simon the Righteous, taught that the world stands because of three things: learning, service, and acts of loving-kindness. (*Ethics of the Fathers* 1:2) It's difficult not to judge. But it is our volunteers' commitment to the values espoused by Rabbi Shimon, not their judgments, that enables Yachad to change so many lives.

—Rabbi Toby Manewith



Rabbi Toby Manewith operates a compound miter saw doing home repair on the Temple Micah-Tiffereth Israel Sukkot in Spring house.

Letter from the President *continued from page 1*

As I begin my term as President of Yachad, I am awed by my responsibility to live up to the commitment required by this saying. As you will read in these pages, Yachad volunteers are stepping up to meet this expectation. There are young people building accessibility ramps during their summer breaks, adults giving their time and support to engage in the dirty work of home repair during weekends when they could be spending time with their own families, and professional building contractors donating the cost of labor to renovate homes for underserved families

I look forward to working with Yachad staff, our Board of Directors and, especially, you. Together, we can complete projects that test our abilities and challenge preconceived notions that we have of ourselves and others. By meeting these challenges and providing others with some of what we know are our greatest assets, we can truly feel as if we have done what is expected.

—Roxanne Littner

Dispatch from Ramp Camp

“You are all angels in my front yard; we just can’t see your wings.” That’s how Betty Muse described the scene in her front yard where ten teens were busy digging holes to secure footings for a ramp that would allow Muse to go in and out of her house.

This is all part of Ramp It Up! 2008, Yachad’s summer camp program for teenagers. Blistered hands, sore muscles and a great feeling of accomplishment happened over two weeks in June when 26 teens, working under the supervision of Yachad contractors, constructed three accessibility ramps for area homeowners. The campers also built a ramp in Alexandria, for Jose Garcia, a father of two who was paralyzed as the result of a gun shot accident, and for Maria Mae Taylor, an 11-year-old in Gaithersburg, Maryland, who has cerebral palsy.

A big thanks to Yachad’s contractors, Louis Tenenbaum, Alan Kanner, Richard Feldman and Justin Barrows. Thank you to Albert (Sonny) Small, Jr., for spending the day swinging the hammer with us. Ariel Poliner, Yachad’s summer intern, and a third year architecture student at University of Virginia, not only worked tirelessly to obtain permits for all three sites, he also worked at the sites as a carpenter. Thanks to architects, Michael Holt, Seth Garland and Lyndl Thorsen Youssef, who provided pro bono services to design and prepare permit drawings for each site. And a huge thanks to my fellow counselor Tamara Slater who helped keep everyone on task and safe.

—Kendra Rubinfeld, Counselor and Program Coordinator



Ramp campers Lila Weintraub (left), Sarah Ragen, Jenny Wittman, Leah Ragen (with back turned) and Taylor Tingle dig a hole for the ramp footers at home of Betty Muse.



Marina Bronstein (left), Aaron Plave and Ariel Poliner use an auger to build Garcia’s ramp.



Jose Garcia (in wheelchair) tries out his new ramp as ramp campers look on.



Maria Mae Taylor’s ramp takes shape as ramp campers hammer away.

Kastner Family, Friends Celebrate Father's Day Repairing DC Home

continued from page 1

Yachad's Mitzvah Projects enable the organizer to celebrate a personal milestone (a special birthday or anniversary, for example) or a holiday (like Father's Day), or just to get friends and family together to perform a mitzvah. (For information on hosting a Mitzvah Project, go to www.yachad-dc.org.)

The Kastner group repaired Brown's front porch, replaced the floors in the kitchen and dining room, repaired broken doors and fixtures and painted nearly every room in the house. The participants spanned all age ranges and skill levels, including proficient carpenters, adept painters and willing novices. In addition to the hands on work, Kastner's friends and family provided funds for supplies and equipment. Yachad selected the appropriate house, supervised the work, and handled the overall administration.

"It was an incredibly rewarding experience," said Stephen Niles, a Holland & Knight partner and a member of the Yachad Board of Directors. "The fact that the work took place on Father's Day and so many fathers and children took part made the day even more special."



A fellow volunteer stands ready to help as Jill Kastner, Jason's mother, works on a railing at Mitzvah Project house.



Homeowner Sheila Brown works with the Mitzvah Project crew to repair her house on Father's Day.



Two Mitzvah Project volunteers prepare kitchen for a sparkling new floor.

Yachad Cookbook—Kitchen to Kitchen Community Development

Sukkot in Spring (formerly Sukkot in April) volunteers should have received a copy of the inaugural edition of *The Yachad Family Cookbook: A collection of recipes sharing traditions and cultures*. The cookbook includes recipes provided by the owners of the houses repaired and upgraded during Sukkot in Spring and Ramp it Up! this May and June. It is illustrated with photos of the work in progress at many of the houses. Yachad Executive Director Audrey Lyon says she hopes future editions of the cookbook will contain recipes from volunteers as well as homeowners and that it will feature "recipes from many traditions, cultures and faiths." All participants are invited to contribute a recipe. Send it to info@yachad-dc.org.

Sukkot in April Becomes Sukkot in Spring As Volunteers and Homeowners Tackle Repairs

Sukkot in April, Yachad's signature volunteer home repair program, is changing its name to Sukkot in Spring. The new label will better describe the ongoing nature of the work and avoid the awkwardness of this year's de facto Sukkot in May.

For the first time, Yachad assumed full responsibility for administering Sukkot in April in DC. Richard Feldman, Yachad's new construction manager, added a level of professional expertise to the endeavor, helping to select houses for repair, defining the scope of work and consulting on specific construction issues.

And, instead of tee shirts, Yachad handed out large blue tote bags to about 300 volunteers from area synagogues and other groups who sawed and hammered, spackled and painted in the houses of low-income homeowners in the District, Montgomery County, Northern Virginia and Howard County.

"We were very pleased with the smooth transition and the homeowners were very happy with the results," said Kendra Rubinfeld, Yachad's program coordinator.

To most volunteers, however, Sukkot in Spring looked a lot like Sukkot in April. Many of the volunteers were old hands at the effort, but two groups participated for the first time. An enthusiastic gathering of 20- and 30-year-old volunteers tagged the "New to Yachad Volunteers" worked on a Yachad-sponsored house and alumni of Birthright, DC, local young adults who went to Israel as part of the Birthright program, worked on the Jewish Federation's Real Estate Affinity Group house. Also participating for the first time in work on many of the houses were the homeowners and their family members.

Among the veteran groups, Temple Micah and Tiffereth Israel again teamed up, this year to work on the home of Norman and Barbara Hill. "We are very lucky to have a core group of volunteers with a range of valuable skills," said Temple Micah's house captain Ed Grossman who collaborated with a new Tiffereth Israel house captain, Stan Grabia. "A major difference this year was that that Norman Hill was able to help with the work—and he worked the whole time right along side us," Grossman said.

Similarly, the adult children of Vermel Howard, the owner of the house repaired by Adat Shalom, put in a lot of effort. "LaVerne and Lester, Mrs. Howard's children, stepped right in and did a lot of the painting and some nieces and nephews helped clean up and prepare the walls," the house captain, David Dolinsky, said.

Often the homeowners are too old and frail to provide much physical labor. That can be a major reason for allowing their homes to slip into disrepair in the first place, requiring the assistance of a program like Sukkot in Spring. But many elderly homeowners have family members in the vicinity.

"I think it's very important to encourage family members to work with us," said Garrett Stackman, co-house captain for the Real Estate



Albert (Sonny) Small, Jr., 2008 Yachad Bash honoree, paints a staircase at the Sukkot in Spring house renovated by the Real Estate Affinity Group.



Marqueeda Goins, the homeowner's daughter, smiles as she works with the New to Yachad crew painting her mother's house.

Affinity Group. "It promotes a better feeling among the volunteers." And it helps develop a positive relationship between the family and the volunteers.

All three of these teams worked on their house's kitchen, in each case turning a dark, cluttered space into a bright, cheerful room. Among other improvements, the Real Estate Affinity Group installed new cabinets, Adat Shalom upgraded the dishwasher and stove, and Temple Micah-Tiffereth Israel installed a bright, new floor. (To see some of the results, log onto www.yachad-dc.org.)



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Vol. 16 – No. 1

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*Building on a Foundation ...
Celebrating a Legacy*

honoring
Albert H. Small and Albert H. Small, Jr.
with the
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Sunday, November 23, 2008
The Ritz-Carlton
1150 7th St. NW, Washington, DC
Cocktails and Dinner 6:00pm

Save the Date!

The poster features a black and white photograph of a shovel and several stacks of bricks, symbolizing construction and building.