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Local teens pitch in to help others during day of service

J-Serve part of a global effort involving thousands of youth

by **Debra Rubin**
NJJN Bureau Chief
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Whether it was by making teddy bears to cheer seriously ill children, packing lunches to feed the poor, entertaining elderly nursing home residents, or learning how to advocate for Israel, 200 teens gave up their Sunday to help others.

The J-Serve program, held March 19 at the Solomon Schechter Day School of Monmouth County in Marlboro, was sponsored by the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey as part of the International Day of Jewish Youth Service.

"I came because we like to help people in our community," said Margo Greenbaum, 17, of Marlboro, who was part of a large contingent of teens from BBYO chapters from throughout central New Jersey.

Margo, who is affiliated with the Marlboro Ruach chapter, was busy making teddy bears to be given by the Chai Lifeline organization to children with cancer. Others making the stuffed animals sat with young adults with special needs from the Friendship Circle of Central NJ — part of Chabad of Western Monmouth County in Manalapan — and Yachad — affiliated with the Orthodox Union but inclusive of those with special needs in the entire Jewish community. Yachad has a partnership with federation.

Mia Frank, 23, of East Brunswick said she was making her bear especially for her aunt who was sick in the hospital.

"We want to help make sick people better," added Arielle Bauer, 25, of Marlboro.

The young adults also worked with teens to decorate items for Shabbat kits to be given to homebound seniors.

"We participate in J-Serve events all around the country," said Sage Linsky of Westfield, copresident of BBYO Central Council of the Greater Jersey Hudson River Region. "We feel we have to do our part as part of the larger Jewish community."

The council's other copresident, Adam Goldman



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Holocaust survivor Edith Reich, surrounded by J-Serve teens, told them about her experiences and the importance of helping others. Photo courtesy Jewish Federation in the Heart of NJ

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of Marlboro, said in addition to teens learning the value of community service through J-Serve, they discover that engaging in tikun olam (making the world a better place) makes them feel better about themselves.

Some teens joined with seniors to make charoset for Passover at the Brookside Assisted Living Community in Freehold. Others went to the Sunrise Senior Living facility, adjacent to Schechter, to put on a play for residents.

At the school, teens tied up individual sets of plastic cutlery with blue ribbons for the bagged lunches being assembled by other J-Servers for Elijah's Promise Community Soup Kitchen in New Brunswick. Other classrooms were filled with young volunteers making phone calls asking for donations for federation and Schechter.

"It's a great cause," said Eli Fisch, 11, of Ocean Township. "I want to help as many Jewish people as I can and do as much for the Jewish community as I can, and federation is a great cause."

As Elyse Farbman of Marlboro, 14, sat at a table decorating socks for hospitalized children, she said, "They don't really have much at a hospital, and on a cold day everyone needs socks."

Aron Wiener, 14, of Allenhurst, said he was inspired by East Brunswick Mayor Brad Cohen, who spoke to the teens about the importance of lobbying for causes that they feel are important, including Israel, and provided tips and techniques to get their point across.

"It made me think that I'd like to do something, maybe write letters and e-mails" to advocate for Israel, Brad said. "It was really interesting."

Paul Friedman, the high school tristate coordinator for StandWithUs — a pro-Israel education organization — and an Old Bridge native, made a presentation on the perception of Israel in the media, using clips from popular shows and news broadcasts. He explained how the teens in interactions with their peers and others could present a positive picture of Israel.

"The truth is already with us," Friedman said. "The problem is people aren't exposed to that truth."

Logan Weiss, 13, of Freehold said he found the stories of three Holocaust survivors — Ilse Loeb, Edith Reich, and Jacob Jasser, who addressed the J-Serve teens — demonstrated how far some people are willing to go to help others.

"I really learned what it was like to be a survivor," he said. "You had to believe in miracles. The woman I listened to was helped by Christians and foster families. She survived because she had help."

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