

Teens Distribute Food, Clothes And Blankets to Homeless

We hear too often on television about how teenagers today are not engaged in our communities. However, the volunteer work of two Westchester youth organizations – Jewish J-Teen Leadership and Elm Street Youth Center – prove just the opposite.

Despite temperatures registering in the teens – or, perhaps, motivated by them – two groups of young people gathered together to bring food, clothing, blankets and personal-care items to the homeless during a recent late-night “Midnight Run” in the dark hours. These two diverse Westchester youth groups began the evening by sorting and packing these items at J-Teen Leadership/UJA-Federation of New York’s Westchester office, at 701 Westchester Ave., White Plains.

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Following a havdalah service, which introduced the ceremony that officially ends the Jewish Sabbath to their non-Jewish friends, the groups packed up the vans and headed into New York City, where some of Manhattan’s most destitute residents were still in the streets after a blizzard that deposited 8 inches of snow.

During the havdalah ceremony, as the teens sang and swayed with their arms around one another, Raymond Reid, site director of the Elm Street Youth Center, said: “We need to do everything we can to make this world a better place – and we’re starting that right now.”

“To give the homeless the things they don’t have makes me grateful for the things I do have,” said Janelle Mroz-Gondré, a 16-year-old student at Yonkers High School and a leader with the Elm Street Youth Center’s Teen Council Leadership Group. “I don’t care if it’s the coldest day of the year, I’m happy to do it.”

In addition to distributing items to the homeless, “Midnight Run” is dedicated to finding common ground between the housed and the homeless. Some of the Elm Street teens live in Westhab family shelters.

Together, the teens learn by doing: Even

those who are underprivileged can accept the responsibility and experience the joy of giving back to those less fortunate in the community.

“Our partnership really highlights why interfaith work is so important,” said Marc Hersch, a 17-year-old student at Scarsdale High School and a chairman of J-Teen Leadership. “We may come from different communities, from different places, and be of different races and religions, but it doesn’t matter at all. We have so much respect for each other and share a lot of values – like the value of community service.”

J-Teen Leadership is a community-service leadership-development initiative for Jewish high school students who want to make a difference in the world, and Elm Street Youth Center is a program by Westhab, Inc., that serves more than 250 school-age youth in the high-need Nodine Hill neighborhood. These groups have spent 18 months fostering cultural understanding and building relationships by dining, learning, and socializing together. They have heard from a Holocaust speaker, attended the American Jewish Congress’s Diversity Breakfast, and hosted each other at Hanukkah and Kwanzaa celebrations.

“We’ve been working together for two years now and have gotten to really know each other,” said Danielle Silverman, 17, of New Rochelle High School, and a chairperson of J-Teen Leadership. “I’ve found that we have a lot in common. To be able to make a difference together, as a group, is really special.”

Once the vans were loaded with supplies and teens, they headed into Manhattan where the area’s homeless were awaiting them on this frigid evening. In addition to blankets, coats, socks, gloves and toiletries, sandwich bags with sweets, fruit and hot chocolate were distributed at four separate designated spots. Stories were shared, names exchanged, and hands shaken.

This project received its funding through a Jewish Social Action Month grant from UJA-



Federation of New York, which funds ongoing, community-based social action projects.

“This project captured our attention because it really dovetails with the work we embrace at UJA-Federation: Caring for the vulnerable in New York, feeding our neighbors, teaching the value of tikkun olam (repairing the world) to the next generation, and building bridges within the community,” said Neil Steinberg, JSAM chairman. “The fact that these two teen groups are continuing their relationship to give back makes it even more special.”



Sam Rowland, 17, of Cortlandt Manor; Janece Mroz-Gondré, 16, of Yonkers; and Janelle Mroz-Gondré, 16, of Yonkers.



Tori Pemberton of Yonkers helps out during the recent "Midnight Run."