



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“Community Service”
by Abigail Lienhard Cohen
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Before starting work on my bat-mitzvah preparations, I had already done some community service -- some of it with the congregation, and some at school. I raised money with the Congregation for the AIDS Walk and helped out at Green Chimneys, an organization that houses teens in the foster care system. With my school, I participated in a Martin Luther King Jr. Day march as well as bake sales, pancake breakfasts and other fundraisers.

At Green Chimneys I helped paint a room that would be used as an office and cleaned up a backyard for the kids to play in. The money I helped raise for my school went to special trips and programs and I felt very good that I helped make them possible.

I also helped with several events put on by Dorot during the fall and winter holidays.

Dorot is a Jewish non-profit organization that provides services like delivering food to the elderly and hosting community events to bring different generations of Jews together. One event was to raise awareness about Dorot; I helped gift-wrap purchases at Barnes & Noble, talking to the customers and handing out pamphlets about Dorot. Another time I, along with my mom and brother, participated in a Dorot Thanksgiving program. We delivered a holiday meal and visited with an elderly woman on the Upper West Side. It was a fun visit; we talked about pets and the presidential election.

For my longer-term community service project, I chose an activity related to hunger. My mom had heard about Jersey City's Grace Church and its Saturday "Breakfast for the Hungry" program from my mentor, Nancy Cohen, and thought it would be a good place for me to contribute my time. I started around a year and a half ago, and still go once or twice a month.

Observant Jews talk about doing tzedakah because it is their duty to God and as Jews, but for me tzedakah is a self-imposed moral obligation. I plan to continue giving my time to the Grace Church program beyond today because it's become an important part of my life.

Before I went to Grace Church for the first time, I thought it would be systematic and not necessarily very friendly. But the people there, both the people who are being served and the servers are nice. The volunteers talk about things like books and sometimes they bring in books for me to read. There's a lot of food, prepared on site and sometimes off-site by other volunteers and, it's tasty. People are friendly to each other and everyone seems to enjoy themselves. There are eggs and grits and at least two potato dishes. There is usually a meat dish or two, and sometimes we even have fish, or rice. We use whatever we get.

Being with those who have less opportunity than myself has shown me that all people, no matter what level they are on the socio-economic scale, are basically the same. Among the volunteers and the people who come to eat there is respect and civility. No one is rude. If we run out of food, or are waiting to cook up some more and can only give out certain amounts, nobody gets angry or complains.

In watching the varied group of people who run the program, especially Genevieve Faulkner, who's here today, I have learned that helping people in this way requires planning, organization and thinking ahead. The organizers need to get there very early and decide what we will be serving that day. They help people find things to do and make sure things in the kitchen and out in the serving line run smoothly.

I have always considered hunger a very important issue, but I see how much there still is to do to ease hunger in the world.

According to the United Nations the number of chronically hungry people in the world has grown to 852 million – more than three times the entire U.S. population. Between 2000 and 2004 alone, the number of hungry in the world increased by 18 million.

Subsistence farming is still a big part of the hunger picture. The UN reported that at least 80% of the world's hungry live in rural areas as subsistence farmers.

So the next step in preventing hunger is to move people to more profitable farming, allowing them to do more for their families than just keep them alive.

I would consider the Grace Church program short-term tzedakah because it provides food for just one meal per week. In order to create a system that helps people in poverty survive and lift themselves out of poverty, you need programs that are a mixture of long-term and short-term tzedakah. If all your programs are only short-term then people will constantly need to be provided for.

Between my work at Grace Church and my study of Norman Borlaug's work on long-term solution to hunger, I have developed a theory about hunger: four steps that a country must take to end hunger. They are growth, distribution, affordability and wealth development. First, the amount of food produced has to increase; second, distribution of that food must be improved so that it gets to all who need it; three, the price of food must be affordable for all and four, food production has to contribute to sustainable economic growth at the local level.

For my personal tzedakah, I will be giving a portion of my bat mitzvah money to two organizations. One is Heifer International, which provides farm animals and training in agriculture for farmers in more than 120 countries. I chose this organization because it fosters sustainable agriculture and helps the hungry feed themselves over the long term. The other organization I will give to is the Jewish Heritage Museum in Battery Park. Though I want to help ease the suffering of others, especially those who require it the most, cultural sustenance for Jews is also important as well. As Rabbi Hillel said, "if I am not for myself, who will be for me?" As Jews we need to preserve cultural artifacts and teach future generations about the past so that mistakes aren't repeated.

Something I've learned from my community service is that people are more alike than not. There is much to be learned from what we have in common and from what makes us different from each other. We can do a lot to help each other in simple ways.