



*Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students*

**“Community Service”**

**by Liana Segan**

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Through doing community service for my Bat Mitzvah, I have come to recognize that I can make a difference by reaching out and being of help to others. I chose to work with two populations I have a personal connection with: gays and lesbians and the elderly.

For my service with the elderly I went to the Hebrew Hospital Home in the Bronx, where I participated in a chair yoga group. Chair yoga is a type of dance therapy for those who don't have enough mobility to fully move on their own. The group was composed of those elders who were suffering from dementia. The amazing aspect of dance therapy was that it brought them back to life. The therapist, Valerie Sevidis, would gather everyone in one giant circle, on chairs, and supply the energy and enthusiasm that gave them something to smile about.

It was very moving to see people involved in physical activity when their minds aren't able to be so active. The group was an opportunity to make their lives more social, so they feel more connected and less alone. Valerie's job is to make them feel comfortable in what can be a very uncomfortable environment. What disappointed me, I must say, was that I wasn't as welcomed or liked as I thought I would be. I mean it's not often that a young girl comes to visit; I thought they would appreciate me being there and remember how it was to be young. But then again they were suffering from dementia, and were not so aware of other people.

It surprised me how diverse the community was. Even though it is called the “Hebrew Hospital Home” not everyone was Jewish; there were many Christians, Blacks, Whites and Hispanics. For me participating in the group was enjoyable and I benefited from the experience. The residents had many levels of memory loss and one of the ways to still connect with them is through movement. It has opened my mind to what dance therapy can accomplish.

Another social action project I participated in was volunteering at the main office of the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network or GLSEN. They are an organization dedicated to creating safe schools for all gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students. They are working towards building a future where every child learns to respect and accept all people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identification.

One of GLSEN's primary programs is No Name calling week, where awareness is raised. During this project kids are supposed to realize how language hurts more than imagined by those who think they are just playing around. There are activities, contests, and lesson plans that are taught in schools having to do with the week. The week's goal is to reduce name-calling against kids who don't fit in or are different than the stereotypical kid in any way, not just relating to sexual orientation.

When I volunteered at the GLSEN headquarters in downtown Manhattan I had no idea it could lead to my possible involvement in bringing No Name calling week to my school. This could be my extended community project, if I have the courage and strength to put my name on the program. To tell you the truth, I am a bit uncertain as to whether or not I want to coordinate this event, even though in

principle I feel that the program is more than ethical. While I have talked the talk and wrote about people who resisted fears and did the right thing, I am having difficulty seeing myself doing the walk. My continued involvement with GLSEN would be to judge one of the contests for No Name Calling week for 2005 or 2006.

As part of my participation with GLSEN I wrote an essay for their website on my personal experiences with name calling. The essay explained how I felt about verbal abuse, and what I thought we, as students, should do to prevent it. I think it is difficult to get adolescents to care or understand how hurtful labeling is which is why GLSEN's mission is to reduce name-calling and aim for tolerance.

In addition to working with a dance therapist and advancing GLSEN's No Name Calling project, I have participated in two AIDS walks and performed before residents in a nursing home both with the City Congregation. We sang many of Aram's songs and other traditional Jewish music. Aram is our musical leader and my previous teacher at KidSchool.

Just because my bat mitzvah is 4/5 over doesn't mean that my community service will end. Hurricane Katrina wiped out New Orleans and left the people in need of basic supplies like clean water, food and shelter. Kyra Zimmerman and I decided to co-host a dance fundraiser to help those who have suffered in New Orleans. Kyra is my dear friend and member of the congregation, who will probably talk about this in her community service paper when her time comes. We used the Dance Studio of Park Slope, which was offered to us free of charge by Jennifer, the director of the studio. We gathered our friends and family to donate money to our "dance for dollars" event. All of the proceeds went to SHARE, which stands for the Secular Humanist Aid and Relief Fund, and is connected to Ameri-care, which is a humanitarian group that distributes medical supplies in response to natural disasters. We raised \$600, and had a great time in the process.

It is my intention to keep with the tradition of Tzedakah, charity, and donate 10% of my Bat Mitzvah money to the two foundations my family has supported for years. My dad has been an active member of the Southern Poverty Law Center ever since his days as a student at Berkeley. The Law Center is internationally known for its tolerance educational programs, its legal victories against white supremacists and its tracking of hate groups. The other organization that we are donating to is the Gay Men's Health Crisis. Don't be fooled by the name, this non-profit organization helps fight homophobia and affirms the dignity of gay men and lesbians in addition to fighting against AIDS.

The problems of today can't easily be fixed by one person or even one organization, but community service is where it all begins. It feels so good to be part of something important that is larger than yourself. I am starting to put my values into action.