REACHING OUT TO JEWISH TEENS

By Anna Khomina

Studies show an alarming drop in participation in organized Jewish activities by teens after they are bar or bat mitzvahed. JCC Maccabi Games® and ArtsFest® buck the trend, by reaching out to teens with activities they love—sports and arts—and delivering them with a good dose of fun, all in a Jewish context.

Juggling friends, homework, Facebook updates, college applications, the latest on their Twitter feeds, plus extracurricular activities that make their college essays noteworthy does not leave much time for Jewish teens to reflect on their connections to Jewish life and their own Jewish identities.

The disturbing truth is that after the bar and bat mitzvah are over, many Jewish teens sever their links to the Jewish community—with their parents’ acquiescence.
or approval. When a 2011 study conducted by Brandeis University looked at how to better engage Jewish teens and make them more invested in discovering their cultural and religious heritage, the researchers found when polling teens in the New York metro area that almost all (97 percent) were involved in extracurricular activities—with the highest numbers taking part in sports (42 percent) and the arts (20 percent)—but only seven percent participated in explicitly Jewish activities.

Those few teens who did connect to the Jewish community, however, seemed to find it not only a good chance to reflect on their rich heritage, but enjoyed hanging out with other Jewish teens their age. One eleventh grader in the study described the importance of Jewish organizations as being “places where Jewish teens can just be Jewish teens.”

The study advised that the most engaging Jewish-oriented activities “will have to stimulate interest among those who do not place Jewish life high on their list of priorities... [and] will need to impress teens from across the spectrum.” The researchers recommended Jewish activities that do not focus solely on Judaism and religion, but offer something fun to do.

Using these criteria, the JCC Maccabi Games® and JCC Maccabi ArtsFest® are ideal teen-engagement programs: five-day summer experiences that focus on fun in Jewish environments. The programs offer Jewish teenagers the chance to play sports they enjoy and create art in intense workshop settings with other Jewish teens, while infusing their program time with Jewish ambience and values. In fact, The Jim Joseph Foundation included the JCC Maccabi Games and JCC Maccabi ArtsFest among 21 programs that successfully bring teens together in their 2013 report, *Effective Strategies for Engaging and Educating Jewish Teens*.

Since 1982, the JCC Maccabi Games have welcomed Jewish teen athletes to gather in host communities and compete in team and individual sports. For teens from areas with small Jewish populations, the experience of being with as many as one thousand other Jews can be astounding. Many young athletes comment that they never realized there were this many Jewish teens who played sports.

In 2006, as a way to invite creative teens to share a similar summer immersive adventure, JCC Maccabi ArtsFest was launched as a partner program to the Games. As Randy Ellen Lutterman, consultant for arts and culture, and director of JCC Maccabi ArtsFest, explains, the program’s goal is to unite people who are passionate about the arts in a variety of ways, “from creative kids who have long been involved in the arts, to the teens just discovering their artistic spark. ArtsFest is full of teens artistically exploring and learning how to express their different ways of looking at the world.”

ArtsFest’s unique blend of Judaism and the arts is what got Sari Rose Brown from Raleigh, North Carolina to participate four times. “Being with this many Jewish kids at the same time is something I never experienced before JCC Maccabi,” she says. For Brown, the chance to come together in the spirit of Jewish “culture and community” is “something I really value about Judaism.” The structure of ArtsFest, which provides teens with the
opportunity to work in groups by specialty track, provides a great opportunity to socialize and form connections with fellow teenage artists, according to Brown. “You’re working with these kids for hours each day,” she explains.

Alexandra White of Brooklyn, New York, attended ArtsFest two years in a row. She still keeps in touch with many of the teens she met there eight years ago. It is “very special and very powerful to be surrounded by Jews…while doing something you’re passionate about,” White says. White’s experience at ArtsFest informed her ultimate decision to pursue a career in the Jewish world.

Each ArtsFest specialty track is led by an Artist in Residence who encourages the group to express their creativity, deepen their artistic experience, and introduces certain Jewish themes that are an integrated part of the Games and ArtsFest each year. This Jewish education and exploration piece manifests in different ways each summer: teens might sing traditional or original Jewish songs in the vocal music track, or paint a Jewish-values inspired mural on the wall of their host JCC. As Lutterman describes it, no matter the specialty, the Artist in Residence “invites the teens to think about how their Jewish identity impacts their work and their art, and encourages them to take an individual and unique artistic journey.”

Remember that Brandeis University study about engaging teens in their Jewish heritage through innovative programming? In its exploration of how teens chose to spend their extracurricular time teens designated “fun” as the number one reason they chose activities—above resume-building activities and even above spending time with friends.

For Lutterman, that’s exactly what ArtsFest and the Games truly boil down to: “It is just fun. It’s fun to make art on a beautiful campus, it’s fun to compete in your favorite sport, and it’s fun to meet kids from places you’ve never heard of, who share similar passions.”

Anna Khomina is an intern at JCC Association. She is studying history at Brandeis University.

JCC Maccabi Games: Austin, TX
July 28 - August 2, 2013

JCC Maccabi Games & ArtsFest: Orange County, CA
August 4 - 9, 2013