



Interfaith youth group teens find shared values through service



JHV: MICHAEL C. DUKE

Volunteers from Interfaith Youth Houston helped provide some 300 meals to homeless Houstonians at The Beacon, on Feb. 10.

By MICHAEL C. DUKE | JHV • Thu, Feb 14, 2019

As Liv Rubenstein added a handful of chopped cucumber to a salad on a tan-colored plastic lunch tray, the ninth-grader engaged the meal's recipient in conversation, asking the middle-aged man for his name and how his day was going.

Rubenstein listened, answered a few questions that the man asked her, then she smiled and lifted the full lunch tray over a stainless-steel counter and handed it to the man, who was layered in clothing to protect from the elements outside.

Over the next two-and-a-half hours, Rubenstein and other teens, who are part of a new citywide interfaith youth group program, worked together at The Beacon in Downtown Houston to serve nearly 300 meals to people who are homeless.

Members of the youth group also volunteered for The Beacon's laundry service that day, Feb. 10, washing and folding clients' clothes, and helping to distribute blankets and winter coats.

At the end of her shift, Rubenstein said the experience was transformative.

"I'm here because I like to volunteer and because I've never done anything like this before," said Rubenstein, a member of Interfaith Youth Houston, a newly formed youth group, comprised of local Jewish, Christian and Muslim teens.

"To be honest, my initial interest in coming here today was to get volunteer hours I need for school," Rubenstein told the JHV. "But now, I can honestly say that this has been one of the most amazing experiences I've had, ever.

"Everyone I met has been so friendly, like a mom who has twins on the way," she said. "You can see that everyone is just really grateful to be here. I'd definitely like to keep doing this work and come back

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and volunteer at The Beacon again.”

‘First of its kind’

That pledge to come back pleased youth group leaders, who believe that service is a great unifier among young people from different backgrounds.

“We created this youth group in order to learn about each other’s religions and do mitzvah projects at the same time,” said Marna Meyer, high school principal at Houston Congregation for Reform Judaism, who co-founded and is co-leading Interfaith Youth Houston with Jack Karn, Houston regional director of Jerusalem Peacebuilders.

HCRJ is partnering with Jerusalem Peacebuilders to run the new group, which held its kickoff this past December. Organizers are reaching out to local churches, mosques and synagogues, encouraging their teens to get involved, too.

“We’re the first interfaith youth group of this kind in Houston,” said Meyer, who also serves as Israel Engagement & Youth Services director for the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston. “The fact that we’re learning about each others’ faith traditions is essential, and this is aided by the fact that we’re working together on some amazing things, in terms of community service and gaining important life skills.

“Many of our kids said they’ve never done laundry before and never cooked and served a meal before, so this experience, in addition to helping people in need, is also benefiting them in many ways, too,” she said.

Hannah Bernosky, an HCRJ member and junior at HSPVA, spent her volunteer time at The Beacon learning how to make guacamole and pico by the gallon.

“I want to support my community,” said Bernosky, as she whisked more avocado into a giant metal bowl in The Beacon’s prep kitchen.

“In addition to doing meaningful service projects like this, I want to learn about everyone’s faith, what they believe in and what they decide to do with those beliefs.

“I think we need to know everybody’s opinions in order to understand them and to fully have peace among people,” she told the JHV.

‘Central to our faith’

Interfaith Youth Houston plans to host half-a-dozen service and learning opportunities throughout the year. Participants will have the opportunity to visit each other’s houses of worship, interact with clergy, then put their shared values into action.

Youth group members helped out at The Beacon on Feb. 10 after touring Christ Church Cathedral, located across the street from The Beacon, where they met with clergy and learned about Houston’s oldest Episcopalian congregation, founded in 1839.

“Service is central to our faith,” said Rev. Art Callaham, Christ Church Cathedral’s canon vicar, who spent time with the youth group members, answering their questions about Christianity.

Rev. Callaham explained that caring for those in need establishes relationships between people, as well as relationships with G-d.

“When you serve [people in need], you serve G-d,” he said. “Being in a relationship with the poor, being in a relationship with the needy, is, in fact, to be in a relationship with G-d.”

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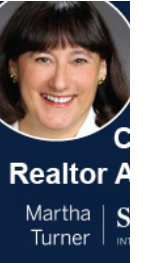
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The Beacon, established by Christ Church Cathedral, is part of the church's effort to serve the community in "deep Downtown," Rev. Callaham noted. Besides meals and providing laundry and personal hygiene services, The Beacon functions as a central intake point for the city's rapid re-housing initiative. The entire operation depends on financial donations, as well as volunteer donations, Rev. Callaham said.

German, who offered only his first name, is a former client of The Beacon, who since has come back as a volunteer after graduating from a Star of Hope program, aimed at helping homeless Houstonians establish housing and employment. He was one of several adult volunteers at The Beacon who worked alongside the teens from Interfaith Youth Houston.

"It was really important for me to help and give back," German told the JHV. "It doesn't matter how you give back – giving people coffee, serving a meal or even washing dishes here. It's imperative to give back after you've been through that kind of situation."

'Treat neighbors as ourselves'

ElFarouq Mosque, St. Francis Episcopal Church and Palmer Memorial Episcopal Church have teens who are participating in Interfaith Youth Houston.

"We're taught to treat our neighbors as ourselves," said Ella Classen, 15, who worked alongside another teen from her church, Palmer Memorial, in The Beacon's laundry service room.

"This means we need to go out there and serve the less fortunate, especially when we're having weather like this," said Classen, referring to the winter temperatures outside. "Help is more needed."

Riley Hutchison, 17, agreed as she folded a pile of freshly laundered clothes with her fellow Palmer Memorial church member, Classen.

Besides service opportunities, Hutchison said she was excited to join Interfaith Youth Houston in order to work with teens who share values, despite having different religious backgrounds.

"I love when anybody can work together, but it's especially nice to have all these people from different faith traditions and houses of worship who want to work together and produce the same result," Hutchison told the JHV. "We're all here for the same thing."

Jack Karn, Interfaith Youth Houston's co-founder and co-leader, said the goal of the group's visit to The Beacon was "to unite Christian, Jewish and Muslim teens around the central theme of service." This goal, he added, coincides with the overall mission of Jerusalem Peacebuilders to "create a better future for humanity across religious and different identity markers."

"We want to bring teens together to activate them around their religions, to become better practitioners of their respective faiths, as well as to consider how service might impact their future careers, their purpose and where G-d is needing them," Karn told the JHV.

'Humanizing experience'

By involving teens in The Beacon, Karn said he wants to break down divisive stereotypes.

"The impact can be very powerful for teens who have the opportunity to interact with people they've probably only seen from their windows or their cars – people maybe they've chosen to avoid or they've hear negative stereotypes about," he said. "To have a

humanizing, positive experience with people from challenging circumstances – the poor, the needy, the homeless – I think is really important, because negative stereotypes lead us to fear and to avoid interactions with some people, which then becomes a dehumanizing experience.”

Staff at The Beacon encouraged members of Interfaith Youth Houston to interact with clients served by the agency.

“When you have conversations with the clients here, it means a lot to them,” said Ronald Marshall, The Beacon’s volunteer coordinator, during an orientation he gave to the teens.

“Just say hi. If they have a name badge, say their name. That makes their day,” Marshall said. “When someone calls out their name, they know they exist and they appreciate that you’ve acknowledged them. That has far greater meaning to them than us feeding them or doing their laundry.”

Teen volunteers, like Liv Rubenstein, took that lesson to heart.

“Their circumstances may be different, but people here are just like you and me,” she said.

* * *

Interfaith Youth Houston’s next event is scheduled for Sunday, March 31, where participants will visit a local mosque and volunteer at Houston Food Bank.

For more information about Interfaith Youth Houston, email Marna Meyer at meyermarna@yahoo.com.

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