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## Sulam Summer Service Corps puts Jewish learning into play

*By Anita K. Kantrowitz, Contributing Writer*

Above the din of screeching shoes, cheering kids and the staccato reverb of every sound, there was a buoyant excitement on the basketball court at Robertson Recreation Center.

But when the calls from the sidelines morphed into panicked directives -- "Wait, run that way! No, THAT way!" -- it was clear there was also, well, a bit of confusion.

When the final buzzer rang, the scoreboard's illuminated "15-18" was of no help -- no one was sure who'd scored what for whom. But the kids all high-fived each other anyway, amid good-natured shrieks of "We won!"

This game took the concept of teamwork to new heights.

Which is exactly what the teams' mentors, a group of high school-age kids participating in a Bureau of Jewish Education-sponsored service learning program, had been working toward since they'd come to the rec center nine days earlier.

As part of Sulam Summer Service Corps, the teens, who come from Jewish day schools and public schools throughout Los Angeles, have been spending their days with local kids who attend the center's day camp. The emphasis for the day camp's elementary school kids is on sports, teamwork and friendship; for the mentors, on giving back.

But the teens are also being asked to reflect thoughtfully about their service experience. As one of a growing number of programs incorporating the methods of a burgeoning field known as "service learning," Sulam requires its teen volunteers to examine their motivations for serving, their interactions with the campers and the ramifications of their shared experience.

Sulam is largely the handiwork of Phil Liff-Grieff, Bureau of Jewish Education (BJE) associate director. Concerned that educators weren't mining the full power of tikkun olam (repairing the world), he began looking a few years ago for ways to help teens make connections both "between their actions and Jewish teachings and between their actions and who they are as human beings," Liff-Grieff said.

In service learning, he found an existing educational model that fit the bill.

Although the term "service learning" was coined in the mid-1960s, the intellectual underpinnings date back to the 1920s, when John Dewey pioneered the concept of "experiential" education. Dewey's model of "learning by doing" has become common even in mainstream education, but his idea of connecting service with personal and social development has been less widespread.

In recent years, however, service learning has been gaining popularity in schools across the country, with organizations like the National Service-Learning Partnership -- an 8,500-member national coalition of educators, policymakers, community partners and researchers -- supporting their efforts.

In most schools, service learning is a way to enhance classroom curriculum. Jewish educators have been tweaking that model by both reversing the order -- starting with the actual service -- and then anchoring the learning and reflection in Jewish sources.

The field has been growing, as evidenced by regional and national organizations that offer resources, consultations and support for Jewish programs (e.g., Spark: Partnership for Service); intensive full-time service learning (e.g., Avodah: The Jewish Service Corps), or increasingly blend study with their existing service programs (e.g., KOREH LA).

Liff-Grieff and his staff launched their umbrella program, Sulam: The Center for Jewish Learning, in January 2006. Funded largely by a three-year grant from the Covenant Foundation (with additional support from The Jewish Federation and the BJE), the result is a multifaceted portal for disseminating information about service learning. Sulam offers online resources for students, parents and teachers; consultations and workshops for educators and administrators; and Spotlight Awards that recognize students for achieving a high level of service.

In the Web site's first year, more than 1,000 users have accessed the vetted and categorized 200-plus agencies offering service opportunities; another 2,500 have used the pedagogic resources. Sulam staff also maintains a resource library of about 250 volumes at the Jewish Community Library of Los Angeles, supplementing the Web site's virtual holdings with additional Jewish sources and materials for educators.

This summer, for the first time, Sulam is offering two sessions of two-week programs, each with a different focus -- from the environment to homelessness to sports and mentorship. In the first session's environmental track, students spent one week replanting and clearing brush in Griffith Park after recent fires and a second week at the Ballona Wetlands.

Most of the teens who chose this session's mentorship track at Robertson Recreation Center did so because they have a passion for working with younger kids; some, like Sara Fletcher, also happen to love basketball. Although Sara said her mom signed her up because she needed community service hours for school, her experience exceeded her initial expectations.

"It's great when the kids see me and run up to me and they're so excited," Sara said. "And it feels like I'm making a difference."

Sara's friend, Maxine Bani, also loves the closeness she's developed with the kids, many of whom she says are now "hugging and kind of sticking to" her and other teens. The two Shalhevet 10th-graders say they've found the study component helpful, though the topical secular sources (e.g., John Wooden on teamwork) more readily so than the Jewish sources.

"When I actually help the kids, some of the stuff we learned pops into my mind, like when we talked

about teamwork and discipline -- I use it in how I talk to the kids," Maxine said. She also values "reflecting afterwards, because it makes me think about the things I did with them and [the] affect it has."

Although the Jewish sources "seemed random at first and didn't really seem to fit," Sara said "when we talked about it [as a group], it made more sense."

Fifteen-year-old Arthur Schrickman is relieved the Jewish learning isn't "just the boring stuff like history. It applies to life in general and to me now, helping these kids."

Most of these teens were enrolled in Sulam by their parents, and while they're uniformly enthusiastic about their interactions with the day campers, not all of them are equally enamored of the structured discussions and exercises. Rabbi Yechiel Hoffman, the sports and mentorship track leader, said this is one of his biggest challenges.

"Just to be around kids and enjoy it doesn't mean you're serving them," said Hoffman, who teaches Jewish studies at Milken Community High School during the academic year. In addition to Jewish and secular texts and discussions, Hoffman has used games, journals and visiting experts to engage the teens in reflection and learning. One guest was Ze'ev Korn, director of school-based mentoring for Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters, who talked with the teens about how to use a friendship "to help the other person develop and grow," Hoffman said.

While Liff-Grieff wants this summer's teens to also develop and grow, staff development is equally important to the project. The summer program is a "demonstration piece" of Sulam's overarching mission to change the "culture" of how service is viewed -- by many teachers and administrators -- from "the slam-dunk experience of accruing hours to one where it is more deeply considered in terms of its benefit and value," Liff-Grieff said. In keeping with that goal, Sulam also sponsors a "council" three to four times a year, during which educators exchange ideas and hear from experts in the field. Additionally, this summer's leaders are developing and refining their own curricula, which Liff-Grieff plans to add to Sulam's Web site so that educators can replicate it in the future.

Hoffman agrees that training educators is crucial to the success of service learning, but he's not sure that a curriculum created for his group will be that relevant for other educators. "The essential model of service learning -- service, study and reflection in a triangular relationship -- it works," Hoffman said. Part of why it is "more profound and has a deeper resonance for students," he said, is the dynamic nature of any experiential education, which he sees as "much less linear than classroom learning."

This dynamism, while exciting for everyone involved, also means that Hoffman and his assistant leader, Payam Kharazi, have already re-written their plans four times since the program began. Which is a good thing, according to Hoffman.

"I think it's very beneficial to have to think about it from the ground up ... to create [a curriculum] and then revise and continue revising as you go along, in response to what actually happens each day," he said.

Hoffman said it's also good to involve teens in this process, since so much of what they do, including community service, is in a controlled environment.

"Having to be flexible is a life lesson most kids don't get to learn until much later -- that it's not all about you and your plan," Hoffman said .

But these indirect, intangible and sometimes unintended results are not always enough to convince educators, administrators and funders to invest in service learning projects. While research exists on secular service learning that shows improvement in academic and social engagement in school (among other gains), there is as yet no research on Jewish programs. One problem in trying to quantify outcomes of any service experience is identifying and evaluating the learning and reflection components of each program. Anecdotally, however, educators do report qualitative results.

Wendy Ordower, a community service coordinator at Milken Community High School who has attended every Sulam council, said that students who participate in service learning projects gain a more profound sense of different populations and their needs.

"The main difference it makes is where I can take them the next time," Ordower said. One student, who was part of a Milken group working in relief distribution centers in Natchez, Miss., after Hurricane Katrina, has since volunteered at SOVA. There, "she went deeper and figured out the big picture," Ordower said. The student saw a need for and organized two drives for toiletries for SOVA, participated in a hunger action day in Sacramento and has since lobbied for hunger relief legislation.

While Hoffman said he can see a similar effect among the teens who truly engage in all aspects of the summer program, he also doesn't expect two weeks to "change them or make them a completely different person in their approach to service learning." The real point, he said, is "to inspire them to see what kind of an effect they can have if they go out there, try to help people, make a difference in their lives -- and to recognize the need to be reflective about [their] work."

Which perhaps isn't all that different from basic tenets of informal education or, for that matter, parenting 101: to help kids develop habits of doing and thinking, and hope some of it sticks. And, Liff-Grieff added, eyeing the exuberant rumpus on the court at Robertson, "to have fun doing so."

*Session 2 of Sulam Summer Service Corps will run Aug. 6-17. For more information, visit Sulam:*  
<http://www.sulamcenter.org>

*National Service-Learning Partnership:* <http://www.service-learningpartnership.org>

*Spark: Partnership for Service:* <http://www.sparkpfs.org/entryPage.cfm>

*Avodah: The Jewish Service Corps:* <http://www.avodah.net>

*Koreh LA:* <http://www.korehla.org>