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Young philanthropists learn how to make a difference

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Members of the Teen Philanthropy Institute meet at the Kaplen JCC on the Palisades to discuss allocations.

What if someone gave you \$10,000 to help fix the world?

That question, posed to 24 area youngsters between the ages of 13 and 16, underlies the work of the Kaplen JCC on the Palisade's Teen Philanthropy Institute, launched in January.

Sponsored by the Jewish Teen Funders Network, the Leonard Rubin Memorial Fund, Areyvut, UJA Federation of Northern New Jersey, and individual contributors, the initiative brings together teenagers "who have a passion for philanthropy, giving them valuable leadership skills and teaching them how to make a difference," said program coordinator Judi Nahary, the JCC's director of youth services.

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The participants, eighth- to tenth-graders from Closter and Tenafly, "all bring different interests to the table," said Nahary. Still, while the youngsters' initial essays on what they would do with the money included some unique ideas — one girl said she would start a sports program for inner-city youngsters — "all shared an interest in helping children and alleviating poverty and hunger."

"I love supporting the agencies that benefit children," ninth-grader Julie Siegler told *The Jewish Standard*, "because I think that if you have problems in your childhood, they will stay with you throughout your life."

As part of the eight-session program, which will culminate in June, each teen contributes \$250 of her or her own money, to be matched by a donor. At the end of the program, all the money collected will be given to the organization, or organizations, selected by the group. Students who cannot provide the initial donation will receive a scholarship, said Nahary, pointing out that participants will meet once or twice a month and will receive "homework assignments" to research suggested charities.

At their meetings, students hear presentations from philanthropists and potential grantees, and discuss allocations.

"We trying to inculcate leadership abilities," said Nahary. "The teens have a separate board and sit in a boardroom. They read agency literature, make calls, and ask questions." Help is provided with public speaking, since each participant will have an opportunity to speak publicly at some point in the program. The group also aims to teach teens to become problem-solvers and consensus-builders, said Nahary, offering practical ideas and resources for projects and providing opportunities for them to engage in them.

"We will teach them how to live their Jewish values through practical application," she said, "while helping them develop critical thinking skills and build confidence and self-esteem."

"I'm learning from the kids," she said. "They surprise you a lot. You have an idea what they will be like, but then quiet kids find their voices and become incredibly vocal. I'm learning from the questions they ask and the way they think."

The teens "want to be philanthropic," she added. "We're catching them at a passionate age, when they have a selfless commitment and believe fully they have a power to make a difference."

Nahary noted that parents will also be involved in the process and will be asked to complete intake evaluations to determine their expectations, their goals for their child, and the causes they personally support.

It would appear that TPI is filling an important niche for its participants. Fourteen-year-old Julie Siegler of Tenafly told the *Standard* that "between sports and school, time for

community service is scarce. TPI offered me an opportunity to do something good for the community and learn about the world of Jewish philanthropy.

"This program isn't just about giving," she said, "but about learning how to give." In addition, she said, "learning how to interact and be effective as a group and to listen to everyone's ideas is something that I will take out of TPI and use for the rest of my life."

Thirteen-year-old Harrison Kashkin said he has always been "very motivated to make a difference and to improve the world around me and give back." The Tenaflly eighth-grader pointed out that he is already involved with charities such as Jenna's Rainbow Foundation, which provides support to families with children battling brain and spinal cord tumors.

Harrison said he's learned from TPI that "giving \$1,000 to one charity may not be the same as giving to another. You have to try to maximize your donation, make sure it works with [an agency's] budget." Similarly, said Julie, you need to ensure that the donation will "get the most value." For example, she said, "if an organization gave 50 percent of its grants to staff salary, that may not be a place that we want to give our money."

Tenaflly resident Kayla Kesslen noted that the TPI program is a "great way to gain understanding about the needy organizations in our area. This program has taught me a lot about the issues that occur in our community. I was previously not aware of the types of agencies out there that focus on helping solve community issues." In addition, said the 10th-grader, "I have improved my compromising, collaborating, and diplomacy skills, which are important to everyday life." Kayla, 15, added that she would like to support some lesser-known charities and hopes TPI will have the power to spread awareness about them.

Fifteen-year-old Justin Grabell credits participation in TPI with helping him "learn the valuable financial lessons we need for life ... whether it be learning how to allocate \$10,000 or the questions to ask possible organizations before giving them the money." According to Justin, a 10th-grader in Tenaflly, "In school, most students are not taught how/where to spend their money, which ends up getting them in a lot of financial troubles as adults." In addition, he said, "I find that teens in this area don't realize how much our community does for us, and I think it is very important to give back to it."

All the youngsters agree that philanthropy is vital.

"I think humans often take things for granted and forget to give back to their community," said Justin. "To me, there is no greater gift than the time one can give."

"I think philanthropy is really important for young kids to know about and understand," said Julie. It is really difficult to grasp all the wealth that we all have until you learn about [the daily lives of] other people ... who have to go to places like Eva's Village," a soup kitchen in Paterson, "to get free meals in order to get by. Every kid my age should learn about philanthropy and community service."