

Charities and Children

Ideas for the Holidays and Beyond

KATHRYN LIVINGSTON

As Chanukah approaches, parents may be thinking of ways to reach out to others. The truth is, however, that any time of year is the right time for giving and helping those in need. Teaching children and teens about volunteerism and charity is an essential part of raising them to be responsible adults, but sometimes even parents aren't sure where their services will be most beneficial. We've drawn together a few ideas you may want to discuss as a family, with the focus on charities and volunteer opportunities in which children and teens can be involved.

The following is a handful of the many places that can use your help during the holiday season and beyond; there are many options ranging from visiting and volunteering with seniors or the infirm at nursing homes or hospitals, to pitching in at food banks or shelters, animal rescue organizations, or area environmental centers. As Daniel Rothner, founder and director of Areyvut in Bergenfield, points out, "There are so many opportunities for getting kids and families involved, and once someone is involved it's a very powerful and meaningful experience." Please check the most recent *Guide to Jewish Life*, published by the Jewish Standard, for a complete list of volunteer opportunities.

Kaplen JCC on the Palisades, www.jccotp.org

Here are two great ideas from the Kaplen JCC on the Palisades. If you, your child, or your teen knits, consider joining up with the Knitting for Need project, which was originally launched as a project for senior citizens, but has now been expanded to include knitters of all ages. This wonderful group of volunteers knits hats for American and Israeli soldiers, scarves for veterans, blankets for hospital neonatal units and emergency rooms, and more. Beginner, intermediate and advanced knitters are all welcome to participate. Contact: Debra Turitz, 201-408-1450.

Teens will be interested in Teen Mission "2" New Orleans, which is currently registering participants. The group of high school students will complete an intensive, three-day community service project January 16-18 to help victims of Katrina continue to rebuild their homes and their lives. Five years after Katrina, more than 850 families in New Orleans are still living in FEMA trailers, and more than 6,000 homeowners can't afford to rebuild their homes. The Kaplen teen group teams up with the Saint Bernard Project—a local non-profit organization that supports Katrina victims—in this important mission. Contact: Sara Lewis, 201-408-1469, slewis@jccotp.org, or Judi Nahary, 201-408-1470, jnahary@jccotp.org. Parents can also attend as part of the UJA's Klene Up Krewe: call 201-820-3920.

Kaplen is also home to the Teen Philanthropy Institute, which was launched in 2008 to inspire teens with a passion to become involved in social justice issues and embrace the core Jewish values of tzedakah (charity), chesed (kindness), and tikkun olam (repairing the world). Teens have worked for poverty, education, hunger, healthcare, homelessness and other issues, raising thousands of dollars for Bergen Reads, Bonim Builders, Table to Table, the Center for Food Action, and other charitable causes. Randie Adler, a 17-year-old senior at Tenafly High School, has been a member of the Teen Philanthropy Institute for three years and says she believes in the causes the group supports and is looking forward to going on the Mission "2" New Orleans in January. Adler says that the institute does a lot of site visits to many local organizations. She's had an opportunity to help out at Habit for Humanity in Englewood and to volunteer her time at many nursing homes in the area. The teens also take an active role in determining where monies they raise will be allocated. Contact: Judi Nahary, 201-408-1470.

Jewish Family Service, Inc., www.jfsbergen.org

The Food Pantry at Jewish Family Service in Teaneck is in need of help re-stocking its supplies. This is a great way for kids and families to get involved with helping those in need and can be done as a family or as a school project. "If you need direction on how to set something up, we'll walk you through the process," says Lyn Leeds, social work intern at Jewish Family Service. Generally, families collect the goods and then make arrangements to drop them off at the center. Another option is to "adopt" a needy family for the holiday. "There's no end to the ways in which a family can handle it," Leeds says. "You as a family can find your own very special and unique way to help." Some families have used food basket donations instead of balloons or themed centerpieces at functions such as bar and bat mitzvahs. Or, with a supermarket's permission and adult supervision, kids might collect donations from people entering and leaving the store. Schools can have contests from grade to grade to bring in food items, or each grade can be assigned a different food item to collect. The food pantry at JFS is in constant need of replenishment. This need extends far beyond the holiday season; replenishment for late spring and summer is imperative as school is out and many children do not have the benefit of breakfast/lunch provided through the school, Leeds explains. Contact: Lyn Leeds or Faith O'Connor: 201-837-9090. You can also call the Center for Food Action, 201-569-1804, www.cfanj.org, for information about various other food pantry locations.

The Friendship Circle of Passaic County (FCPC), www.fcpassaicounty.com

This is a group that helps kids who have special needs. Director Sariba Feinstein says that kids in grades 8-12 are needed for a program called Friends at Home. The volunteer (or volunteers—kids can buddy up if they desire) visit the child with special needs on a weekly basis, helping the child with homework, playing sports, watching videos, or working on art projects together. "Basically the volunteer is there to be that child's best friend because usually these children don't have a great social life and may not be invited to birthday parties or sleepovers," Feinstein explains. Friendship Circle of Passaic County is also working on a Karate Club and Soccer Club; recently they hosted a Bowling Club, and

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nearly 20 teen volunteers were on hand to bowl, laugh, and cheer with an equal number of children with special needs. If you live in the Passaic County area and your adolescent would like to be involved in this wonderful volunteer experience, call Sariba or check online at www.friendshipcircle.com to find the Friendship Circle near you. Contact: Sariba Feinstein, 973-694-6274.

Bonim Builders, www.ujannj.org/bonim

Bonim is Hebrew for builders, and this group specializes in renovating homes in the northern New Jersey area for low-income families that are in need of assistance, explains Bonim Coordinator Stacey Orden. The group also does renovation for the mentally disabled and for the physically challenged. Although there is sometimes an age requirement (they do use power tools and other equipment), kids age 12 and up are generally welcomed along with a parent who is participating. Projects are conducted on Sundays. For instance, over the course of many Sundays, Orden explains, volunteers were able to renovate a home that had been vacant so that a homeless family of six could move in rent-free for two years. They fixed water damage and helped to make the place cozy and warm. Bonim Builders will sometimes partner with Habitat for Humanity or Rebuilding Together. Volunteers of all skill levels are welcome, even with little or no experience, depending upon the project. "We welcome families to come and work together," Orden says, "People can come and join one of our ongoing projects any time." Arrangements can also be made for Bonim Builders bar and bar mitzvah projects. Contact: Stacey Orden, 201-820-3903, staceyo@ujannj.org.

Major Stuart Adam Wolfer Institute/Dandelion Project/Cell Phones for Soldiers, www.msawi.org

Here is a unique and accessible project for kids in third grade through adults. Stuart Adam Wolfer, a Major in the Army Reserves of Boise, Idaho, was killed in Iraq during attacks that occurred in the Green Zone in 2007. His family has become actively involved in Cell Phones for Soldiers (www.cellphonesforsoldiers.com), collecting cell phones that are converted to purchase 45-60 minute renewable calling cards soldiers can use to call home from their place of duty. The Wolfer family also operates a program to provide soldiers with care packages (called Support A Soldier Box). Kids of all ages can become involved in this worthy endeavor; it also makes a great bar or bat mitzvah project or can be used as a Scout badge or community service project. Individuals, families, classes, entire schools or communities can become involved, and the Wolfers provide detailed instructions on how to proceed. "When Stuart was called to service," his mother, Esther Wolfer, explains, "we knew we wanted to get involved in a project that would help soldiers. We found various organizations on the Internet and decided that this was the one we wanted to support." Through the cell phone, care package, and a variety of other projects available on their website, the Wolfers continue to honor their son's legacy and all men and women of the American armed services and their families. Contact: Esther Wolfer (cell phones), 561-998-1969, esther@msawi.org; Beverly Wolfer Nerenberg (Support A Soldier Box), 917-882 4089, beverly@msawi.org.

Areyvut, www.areyvut.org

Areyvut is a non-profit organization based in Bergenfield with a wide variety of ideas for volunteer and charitable deeds. In fact, you can check their website any day of the year to find "A Kindness a Day" tip and accompanying quote, with suggestions like collecting sleeping bags and blankets from friends and colleagues and donating them to an organization that distributes them to people in need, or donating suits you no longer wear to places

that provide business clothes to low-income individuals looking for work. This year Areyvut's annual "Make a Difference Day" will be held April 1-3, says founder and director Daniel Rothner. Areyvut offers a range of hands-on projects that families, synagogues, schools, communities, and organizations will be using all over the country. Rothner explains, "Just as on Thanksgiving people are more thankful and people interact with their parents differently on Mother's and Father's Day, so we dedicate a day which is powerful and unites people, but there are some people who will take the ideas and use them on an ongoing basis." Areyvut (which means "responsibility") provides all kinds of ideas and educational materials to help families become involved in giving and charity work. This year the general theme is "Building Blocks that Matter: Strengthening Relationships and Fostering Community." Past years have focused on health and wellness, preserving the environment, hunger and poverty, and senior citizens. Activities include visiting patients in hospitals, volunteering to run errands for a neighbor without transportation, bringing a favorite food to nursing home residents, or running a lemonade stand and donating the profits to charity. Areyvut is a resource of endless ideas for parents and children wanting to make a difference. Contact: 201-244-6702, info@areyvut.org.

Bergen Housing, Health, and Human Services Center

If your family would like to help the homeless, there are several ways you can pitch in at this shelter on River Street in Hackensack. One idea that is great for kids is to provide shelter residents with a lunch, says director Julie Orlando. She suggests getting a small group of children together and making sandwiches. Include a juice box and fruit (cookies or chips optional), and place everything in brown bags. Choose a school vacation day for the project and form an assembly line. The best way is to call and arrange a date; Orlando will walk you through the process. Kids can also come to the shelter (accompanied by an adult) to drop off and distribute the food. Dinner can also be provided (call Family Promise, the organization that oversees dinners served at the shelter, www.bergenfamilypromise.org/bfp/, 201-833-8009). Another option for kids and families is to run a drive: collect hats, sweatshirts, gloves, socks, or toiletries such as toothpaste, shampoo, and feminine hygiene products (small, hotel-sized items are best) or inexpensive watches with alarms. Make sure all clothing is new (used coats will be accepted if dry-cleaned). Another approach is to get a group of kids together and sponsor an individual who is coming out of homelessness by getting together sheets, towels, pots, pans, and other house-warming items. Be sure to call in advance and make arrangements for dropping items or food at the shelter. Contact: Julie Orlando, 201-336 6476.

Milk + Bookies, www.milkandbookies.org

If you're searching for a charitable activity for younger kids, Milk + Bookies may be your answer. Milk + Bookies is a nationwide charitable organization that provides kids with an opportunity to select, purchase, and inscribe books that are then donated to children who don't have reading materials of their own. Parents of younger kids can host a M+B birthday party in their homes and ask that instead of a gift for the birthday child, guests bring a new hardcover picture book that will be donated to a local group of your choice. When the guests arrive, they can use crayons and markers to inscribe a bookplate for their book (bookplates, stickers, book marks, and literature on giving are all available at the Milk + Bookies website). Kids will also get an "I donated" sticker to wear. Older kids can become involved with a class project by hosting a party at a local book

store such as Barnes and Noble and inviting neighborhood families with young children. Kids post flyers at preschools and kindergartens and get a local bakery to donate cookies and milk. After the event the books are given to a recipient organization of the group's choice. Since 2004, Milk + Bookies has donated thousands of books to needy children, and inspired thousands of youngsters to learn about the joys of giving books. Contact: 323-863-5742, info@milkbndbookies.org.

Volunteer Center Of Bergen County, www.bergenvolunteers.org

The Volunteer Center of Bergen County is located in Hackensack; check out the website with your kids. It's a great online resource, with a special section for teens. Here you'll find many other opportunities for volunteering in our area, ranging from preparing and serving a meal to seniors to helping out at the United Cerebral Palsy Association. Contact: 201-489-9454, info@bergenvolunteers.org.

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