

'The Best Things in Life Are Free'

An Intergenerational Evening: *Connecting High School Students and Our Elders*

Thursday, November 15, 2012

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Our JCC, Sonoma County Teen Chaverim program has been going in its many incarnations for close to 20 years. In addition to our bi-weekly dinner discussions, each year we search for forums for engagement in social connection that enhance our experience of learning together and are also compelling and innovative.

A recent discussion amongst the 11th and 12th graders was dedicated to the connections, understanding and relationships to elders in their families and communities. We shared tender and humorous stories and memories about our experiences with grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. We discovered that there is actually an area in which adolescents and senior citizens meet and it is around the topic of independence and freedom. The teens have urgent desire for independence and many seniors have a fervent and dedicated intention to hold on to their independence and freedom.

On Thursday, November 15, 2012, we followed up with an invitation to Jewish senior citizens in our community to join us for dinner and an intergenerational discussion. Ten eager attendees from our elder community participated.

We began with a motzi and a shared dinner. We had been advised that the seniors might not want pizza, so we included a lasagna casserole that was enjoyed. The seniors responded enthusiastically to the Mary's pizza, generously provided by one of our Chaverim parents.

Our dinner was followed by a touching message from Shoah survivor Susy Raful and her husband Bob about the annual teen 'Yom Ha'Shoah' essay contest coming up. Susy expressively shared a few "snippets" of her amazing story with the teens who were riveted by her every word. Each year Chaverim students participate in this contest with other Jewish teens in Sonoma County.

After a warm "Shekianu" we adjourned to the sanctuary at Congregation Shomrei Torah. We sat in a circle for the evening's discussion - teens and seniors shared respective teen cultures, Jewish experience, life experience, school, college and other aspirations. Our guests were surprised to see the teens initiate the Chaverim ritual of putting all phones and gadgets on the floor in the center of the circle, to rest them for the session.

The discussion featured shared intergenerational stories about everything from parent expectations and relations, dating, schoolwork, stress levels, to college plans, weekend recreation, and of course Jewish identity and youth group involvement. Some heartfelt sharing took place, showing the contrasts and similarities between modern teen life and teen life in past generations. For example:

- Most of our seniors did not have much organized "Jewish youth group" involvement, while many grew up in hubs of Jewish community, where Jewish life was clearly available and present.
- Our senior guests claim to have had less school and college/achievement related stress.
- They didn't have much money, or worry about money.
- Most of the senior guests went to community colleges for their first two years.
- Girls often did not have a lot of encouragement to go to college back in "the day".

- Dating was similar but with different “terms” and “expressions,” and a kiss was still a kiss!
- They were amazed at the virtual aspects of dating, including the use of Facebook to announce being “single” or “in a relationship”.
- Some schools “back in the day” had a kind of fraternity or sorority life that featured a good deal of drinking.

There was much joy and laughter as the students shared contemporary adolescent customs that surprised and startled the seniors. The idea that kids could now get a “5.0” average was surprising and the amount of homework and extra curricular activity was overwhelming to some of our guests.

This amazing evening was capped off by a Chaverim tradition called “random thoughts,” in which we quickly go around the circle and hear 5-10 “off the top of the head” comments from each circle member. Seniors shared their heartfelt encouragement, approval and “kvelling” with the teens, and the teens were delighted by their interest and approval.

This is a good reminder when planning various events and lessons for our Jewish teens. Any time we can participate in authentic engagement and connection with diverse groups, it can be an eye-opening, memorable and meaningful experience. We are often attracted to glitzy, high tech and costly venues for our teen activities that do offer entertainment, but are short in offering human connection. In these times of budget limitations, and shortages of person to person connection, we are reminded that, as Irving Berlin sang, some of the “best things in life are free.” There are so many activities that we can share that are low in cost and bring a lot! Some of those that we have found, in addition to this intergenerational gathering are:

- Progressive dinners where we go from house to house of members of our groups for courses of dinner, with a shared Havdallah service.
- Compelling panel discussions such as one we had several years ago about Judaism, teens and the law, featuring a rabbi, a Jewish peace officer, and a Jewish lawyer. We plan to repeat this spring.
- Good old-fashioned ‘Shabbatons,’ in which we share in a synagogue service, dinner and sleepover at the synagogue.
- Career and college information nights which we also plan to offer again this year.

Thanks again to our high school students and senior guests for providing an example of an event that can be shared in any community, which can help us to preserve our heritage, enrich our Jewish lives, and bring a comforting connection to a somewhat frantically busy world.