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by Paula Amann

News Editor

Philanthropists in training CESJDS students make bar/bat mitzvah grants

The girl in green smiles as she holds four fingers up in the air while a few seats down, the bespectacled boy in the red cap soberly raises his index.

With her high rating and his lower one, Ilia Esrig and Reuben Jacobson, both students at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School, are helping decide how to make \$500 count.

Their small gestures < combined with others from the 10 other eighth-graders around the table < could boost the budgets of a handful of nonprofit ventures near and far.

The dozen decision makers, aided by a trained facilitator, CESJDS president Nancy Hamburger, are part of the Charles E. Smith B'nai Mitzvah Tzedakah Project piloting this fall at the Rockville day school.

Multiply their process by 12 and you have a sense of the deliberations unfolding around the building last Friday as the class of 2011 weighed its philanthropic options, allocating a total of \$6,000.

The funds came from donations by the families of this bar/bat mitzvah year class, in lieu of presents, and in honor of Smith, a local businessman turned philanthropist and school founder.

Around the table in the atrium last Friday, the 12 eighth-graders were weighing large, established nonprofits like the American Cancer Society and Magen David Adom against smaller, local ones where their funds could make a bigger dent in human needs.

"When you save a Torah, it's like a piece of God," says Jeremy Dingott, touting Rockville's Save a Torah, Inc., which repairs damaged, sometimes historic, Torah scrolls.

But Ilia wants her peers to remember the dual mission of a relatively new Rockville-based group that extends aid and solidarity to terror victims in Israel.

"Operation Embrace helps people a) become better and b) be recognized," Ilia Esrig reminds the group.

The students mull giving to both Jewish and non-Jewish causes, as in Camp Jabberwocky, a summertime haven for autistic kids, and the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, which resonates for some participants with cancer survivors in their families.

In a Nov. 8 kick-off session for the project, Jewish Youth Philanthropy Institute trainers made their point with a prop: a light bulb decorated to look like the earth, which they shattered, gathering the pieces in a bowl, says Rebecca Weisman, executive director of the Rockville-based JYPI, which brings teens together to raise funds and allocate them.

" 'You're the ones that are going to put this back together through tzedakah and philanthropy,' " Weisman said she told the day school students.

The class of 2011 split up into granting groups, which thrashed out the role of nonprofits, criteria for giving and research methods to sharpen the aim of philanthropic dollars.

At a Dec. 4 follow-up session, students themselves presented 16 semifinalist nonprofit groups, expounding on their relevance to Jewish values, their mission, the needs they address and their impact on those served.

"Seeing 136 kids listening raptly and taking notes < it was incredible," says CES-JDS middle school director Joan Vander Walde, "and they did this for an hour and a half in an auditorium, seated!"

In the atrium last Friday, the huddled young funders whittle their choices down to five: the Potomac-based Operation Embrace, which assists victims of terrorism in Israel; the Homeless Children's Playtime Project, which offers kids a safe haven for play in southeast D.C.; Magen David Adom; K.E.E.N. (Kids Enjoy Exercise Now), a recreational program for individuals with special needs; and the American Cancer Society, which all win more than 40 points.

"Let's narrow it down to two," opines Shira Singelenberg, who wins the day.

Daniel Schwaber, who had advocated for the Playtime Project, releases his friends from loyalty to his cause.

"If money doesn't go to my charity, it's not the end of the world, because it means it's going to a different charity," said this longtime volunteer with the District program.

Yet he makes a strong case for funneling money to the project.

"These kids live in horrible conditions and have nothing of their own," Daniel says. "It's really important because it relieves the stress."

Miriam Duffy backs him up, seeing a greater impact in giving to the fledgling nonprofit.

"Since it's a small budget, it works to our advantage," she tells the group.

Minutes after the class bell rings, consensus reigns as students evenly split the pot between Operation Embrace and the Homeless Children's Playtime Project.

JYPI's Weisman is hoping participants will walk away with a keener sense of Jewish responsibility for helping fix the world's problems.

"Tzedakah's not an option; it's an obligation," Weisman said. "It's how we're partners with God; it's how God gets things done."