

# JEWISH REVIEW

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## Teens learn philanthropy in Jewish Community Youth Foundation

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Thirteen teenagers sampled the adult world of charitable giving and emerged with a hunger for community involvement as they selected the smorgasbord of charities to receive the first grants awarded by the Oregon Jewish Community Youth Foundation.

Created as a bat mitzvah project of Julia Weiss, the OJCYF completed its inaugural year awarding grants totaling \$5,000 to four Jewish and four secular charities (see box). The youth foundation was set up under the auspices of the Oregon Jewish Community Foundation, with OJCF Executive Director John Moss, OJCF fund accountant Sarah Wepler and Weiss' mother Marcia Weiss serving as adult advisors.

"A seed for citizenship has been planted," said Moss after the final meeting of the inaugural youth foundation on Feb. 8. "Give it 10 years and you'll see all these kids involved in something."

For Weiss' father Stuart, the foundation provided, "my first glimmer of seeing her as an adult." He said Julia put in a lot of time and effort and had a "very adult attitude" in her work creating the youth foundation.

Members of the first OJCYF board were nominated by their synagogues and schools to participate in the foundation. Each of the 13 students on the board made a minimum gift of \$36 (double chai). Matching gifts from Henry and Gerel Blauer, Harold Pollin, Stuart Durkheimer and the Holzman Foundation added to the funds available for distribution by OJCYF.



**JULIA WEISS** created the Oregon Jewish Community Youth Foundation as a bat mitzvah project.



**OJCF** Executive Director John Moss leads a discussion of potential grantees during a meeting of the Oregon Jewish Community Youth Foundation.

Moss said the donors of the matching gifts told him they were motivated to aid the youth foundation because they see "how important it is for the next generation to assume the joys and responsibilities of giving."

Each teen visited one Jewish and one non-Jewish charity then made a presentation and grant recommendation to the board. After hearing all the presentations board members debated how to allocate the funds.

That debate gave the teens an abbreviated look at how adults struggle to allocate funding among many worthy causes.

"I think we should give ... smaller grants," said Tali Singer. "There are so many different organizations that are not related. We should discuss the needs each organization addresses."

"I think we should try and narrow it down," said Julia Weiss, in urging larger grants to fewer organizations.

OJCYF STUDENT BOARD ALLOCATIONS		
Jewish Family and Child Service	\$1700	
Jewish Federation of Portland	\$500	
NW Jewish Environmental Project	\$100	
Robison Jewish Home	\$200	
New Avenues for Youth	\$1000	
Oregon Food Bank	\$1000	
Clackamas Women's Services	\$200	
Dougy Center	\$250	

Michael Dearborn agreed. "Larger grants make more of an impact rather than a lot of smaller grants," he said.

"Some organizations are losing money, so even a small grant will make a difference," countered Jeff Bandel.

"This is the dilemma a board has to go through," Moss told the teens, noting adult boards take three to four times as long for their allocations decisions with many board members becoming very emotional during the process.

Many of the teens also seemed to develop an emotional connection with the programs they had visited.

"There was a magical moment when they got the bug," said Moss. "They didn't want their cause to lose."

"It's really sad to see what kids have to go through when they are so young," said Melanie Russell, who visited Make a Wish Foundation. "They aren't going to live as long as most people, so I think they should get one wish. I think it's really important."

Jeff DeWitt was so moved by what he saw at the North Portland Nurse Practitioner Clinic that he said he and his dad made a donation after his visit.

"It's a clinic of last resort," said DeWitt. "If this place gets shut down due to recent budget cuts, it's a life and death situation for a lot of people."

Singer called the Portland Urban League the highest level of tzedakah because its programs help people become independent and help themselves.

"Being well-educated is something we take for granted and it's so important," Singer said in urging a large grant for the Urban League.

While those three charities had strong proponents, they lost out when the board decided to make two large and two small grants to non-Jewish agencies. Singer expressed disappointment over her inability to convince the other board members of the Urban League's importance.

"It was kind of harsh the way we eliminated some organizations," she said. "But we only had so much money."

More successful in their pleas were Weiss and Aaron Wasserteil, who advocated for New Avenues for Youth and the Oregon Food Bank, each of which received a \$1,000 grant.

The New Avenues for Youth Education Center provides an alternative school setting for homeless youth ages 12-21. The school provides three meals a day, a large variety of classes and help finding jobs for older kids, said Weiss.

"They do a lot of community services so the kids feel like they are giving back," added Weiss.

She concluded her plea for a large donation saying that if New Avenues didn't exist, "There would be more homeless people because they would grow up without an education."

Wasserteil noted that Oregon is the hungriest state in the nation and 40 percent of those who receive food from the Oregon Food Bank are under 18.

"I think it's important that we donate a lot of money to this," Wasserteil said.

OJCYF BOARD MEMBERS
Ali Sakai
Jeff DeWitt
Tali Singer
Kenji Kurosaki
Julia Weiss
Jeff Bandel
Ethan Gross
Annie Levine
Aaron Blumenkron
Melanie Russell
Isaac Callagan
Michael Dearborn
Aaron Wasserteil

Debate over how to allocate the 50 percent of the foundation's funds to Jewish organizations was less heated. The teens easily agreed to give the largest grant to Jewish Family and Child Service and a good-sized grant to the Jewish Federation of Portland. Various teens commented that those two organizations helped a large number of people.

Though Ethan Gross said that the Mittleman Jewish Community Center was very important for "holding together the Jewish community," and Ali Sakai called the center "our community ... everybody is here," the MJCC missed out on a youth grant.

"I wanted a lot of money to go to every group, but there was not enough money to do that," said Wasserteil. "It was difficult to figure out as a group how to allocate the money. ... I thought the money was allocated pretty well."

In interviews after the foundation completed its first year, many of the teens said they had a much better understanding of the allocations process and how adults decide where to give their charitable dollars. Those interviewed also said they enjoyed being part of the foundation and hope to participate in similar ventures again.

"I liked it," said Wasserteil. "It didn't take too much time but it was really effective. I could help the Jewish community and all of Oregon."

Ethan Gross said he learned a lot about Jewish perspectives on tzedakah.

"It was a lot of fun and it gave me the option to express my opinions and that had a bearing on the overall outcome," said Gross, who advocated for fewer large grants. "I learned a lot about how the system worked."

"Personally I would have hoped that the Northwest (Jewish) Environmental Project would have received more," Gross said, "but I was pleased with the way we came to a decision of who would get money."

From Weiss' perspective as the foundation's creator, the OJCYF's first year was "even better" than she had hoped.

She said that it took more time and work to get the foundation started than she had expected, but that it was time well spent. She said that next year she would like to get more young people involved and in charge of the early planning. Weiss said she also would like to have more meetings and devote "more time discussing where our money would go."

Moss said planning meetings for next year's youth foundation likely will begin in May to review the pilot project and decide how to make it even more successful next year. He said he hopes some participants from this year's project will return as student advisors and offer suggestions on how to improve the foundation.

"These kids have a stake in the outcome of this program and I think future years will make them proud of being part of the pilot," said Moss.

Moss said he felt the pilot project was tremendously successful in inspiring the youth.

"That's our job-to create a culture of giving," Moss said.

For more information on being involved in next year's youth foundation, call the OJCF at 503-248-9328.