

Repair the world

SPONSORED BY THE HAROLD
GRINSPOON FOUNDATION

Spring Break: It's About

Give, Not Take

"WE ARE NOT OBLIGATED TO FINISH
THE TASK, NOR ARE WE FREE TO
IGNORE IT."—Pirkei Avot 2:21



A year after Hurricane Katrina, one teen visits New Orleans to see if anything has changed. AMANDA BILSKI

Traveling to Louisiana during my spring break has given me a new perspective on my life as a Jewish teenager, as well as a newfound respect for those who have suffered from Hurricane Katrina.

Our group, the UJA-Federation of N.Y. J-Teens from Northern Westchester County, drove through the largely-abandoned city of New Orleans, observing the overwhelming amount of boarded windows and blue tarps everywhere. I have never smelled anything worse than the putrid stench of lingering mold. These memories make me realize just how lucky I am to be living in a house and to have a community to rely on for education, recreation and religious observance.

We viewed the destruction firsthand by going inside the ruined buildings. Our first stop was the only Orthodox synagogue in New Orleans, which was damaged beyond repair. We learned that a direct result of this destruction was that the Orthodox community had more or less vanished.

But many other communities suffered losses greater than the Jewish people. We found that the loss was enormous and irreplaceable. I have no idea how people were able



ZION OZERI

Amanda Bilski (far right) with fellow J-Teens

to survive without the warmth and support of their community and how they continue to do so presently. These victims are some of the bravest and most determined people I have ever met in my life.

At first, there was some hesitation coming down to New Orleans, since we were enthusiastic Northerners reaching out to the affected population of Southerners. We weren't sure if our acts of *tikkun olam* would be accepted.

Our hesitation soon evaporated. Each of us brought an extra duffel bag filled with items to donate to children living in FEMA trailer villages. After opening our hearts to them and offering our full support and kindness, we found that each and every person was so gracious and that we had temporarily ignited a spark of hope in their eyes. They knew they were not forgotten. We realized how much determination

and spirit they have to face the brutal challenges of Katrina aftermath.

Whether it was serving lunch and talking to people at the St. Vincent De Paul dining room or experiencing an afternoon of music and fun with the residents at the Airport 2 FEMA Trailer Village in Baton Rouge, we felt that each smile exchanged lifted their spirits and pushed them to fight a little bit harder to find happiness in the moment. After listening to the mind-blowing survival stories from people who had virtually nothing left, the one thing that they implored us to do was to share their stories and "never forget [them]."

Judaism is about acts of loving-kindness and helping to mend and repair the world. Being Jewish affected my overall experience tremendously because I felt that it was my job to try and help with the relief effort as much as I could.

All 23 J-Teens viewed the vast amount of destruction and knew that as Jews, it was our duty to return home and share the stories we had heard with our larger community. It is so important that these accounts are shared because this is an issue that needs attention. Ten months have passed since the storm, but little has changed on the ground since that time. Together our voices have the power to bring change. We can help make a difference if we focus on what still needs to be accomplished. ★

AMANDA BILSKI is a sophomore at Horace Greeley High School in Chappaqua, N.Y. She is the co-chair of the J-Teen Leadership Circle from North Westchester County, N.Y.

For more about teen giving,
check out jphilanthropy.com.