

A Lesson Learned from Generation Next

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by Jessica Toledano

A lot and I mean a lot has been written about the generation that follows mine. I'm a Gen-Xer. We are commonly referred to as the so called MTV generation – need I say more? Quickly written off by “Boomers” as the “do nothing” generation, we have been passed over by what many pundits predict is the “next great generation.” Known as “Millennials” or “Generation Next,” they are the talk of the town – particularly in Jewish circles. Surveys seem to indicate that they are more ambitious, globally aware and technologically savvy than any generation before them. They are also less driven by fear and guilt, and more by possibility and opportunity, turning an almost deaf ear to the traditional Jewish mantras that have been successful in the past. And their engagement is coveted by almost every Jewish institution in North America.

I was a skeptic of this “it” generation, a critic even. A lot of hype doesn't mean anything – can you say Y2K? Prove it was my attitude. I was personally a little tired of hearing about these sought after super stars – or maybe just a tiny bit envious. Never mind – semantics.

I finally had the opportunity to see for myself. I direct the communications for the Jewish Community Foundation of San Diego and like most Jewish organizations around the country, it is a priority to try to engage Gen-Next. And how better to entice the do-gooders, than with a do-gooder camp? Right, of course right – the Philanthropy Leadership in Training Camp to be exact. My job was to observe and write about the Millennials in action. I frankly couldn't wait for my opinion on them to be confirmed. I knew there was nothing special; they were like every group of young people that has come before them, idealistic and yes, a wee bit complacent. It would be my great pleasure to tell friends and colleagues in the undervalued Gen X crowd that indeed it is just the buzz of the moment and nothing else.

I quickly realized I couldn't have been more wrong.

On our first day, I sat with a few of my colleagues and thirteen extremely eager, bright high-school students. As each of them introduced themselves and talked about why they choose to forfeit a week of their summer to learn about

philanthropy and the non-profit community, I couldn't help but be impressed. Their questions were heartfelt, thoughtful and genuine. They were idealistic with real concern for the collective and not just the individual.

Could these kids be for real? The answer is yes.

The Jewish Community Foundation of San Diego's program is designed to give students a hands-on, real world look at the non-profit sector. Students go inside ten organizations, Jewish and secular, to see first-hand what that non-profit does to make an impact in the local and in some cases, international community. At the culmination of their site-visits, the students are given a lump sum of money from the Foundation to grant to one or more of the organizations in order to forward that non-profit's mission. Throughout the week they also hear from Rabbis and community leaders who helped infuse Jewish values into their decision making process.

At every visit, the students were attentive, respectful and asked thought-provoking questions to the staff representatives. There were moments of joking around and general lack of interest, natural behavior for teens, but for the most part they were all fully committed to the program's goal. I thought back to when I was sixteen and how I spent my summer, usually working in some restaurant, so that I would have money to spend on entertainment or shopping sprees. Never at their age did I consider volunteering in the community – one time my parents made us help at a downtown homeless shelter on Christmas instead of going to our annual Chinese dinner – but that certainly wasn't self-motivated.

Maybe there is something to this Millennial Generation fever?

On the last day of philanthropy camp, the students wrangled with each other for two hours trying to decide where they could collectively agree to send the funds. Not an easy decision with so many worthy causes. It turned into a very passionate discussion for many of the students who felt strongly about their positions. One student argued that the local Jewish retirement homes' costs were so high that there was no way for them to make a real impact and their funds were better off going elsewhere. Another student lobbied hard to give the funds to an organization that helps disabled athletes around the world by providing them with state-of-the-art prosthetic limbs. And yet another chimed in with heartfelt points about an arts organization they toured that helps abused and neglected children work their way back to health. In the end, they all agreed the funds would go to one Jewish organization and one general community non-profit. Their choices were Jewish Family Service's Hand-Up Food Pantry and

Arts – A Reason to Survive, the organization that assists abused and neglected children locally.

An impressive week with what I must admit was a sensational group of young people. Once a skeptic, I had been transformed into a believer. Maybe, just maybe, they are the next “great generation?” If they are, then we must act quickly. They do not relate to any of the old and traditional models that have sailed our “organized” community through many troubled waters together. They want to be hands-on, make real decisions and take their ideas to the next level. They communicate at light speed through Facebook, Twitter and whatever comes next. Multiple layers, complicated campaigns and moving at a bureaucratic pace through a tiered committee structure will not bring them to the table. These kids are sophisticated and want to live lives that really matter. If they do not find it in our community they will look elsewhere – fast. And we as a community can all definitely learn a lesson from them.

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