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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA TEENS DONATE MORE THAN 2,000 POUNDS OF FOOD TO LOCALS IN NEED

Jewish teens lead large scale social action project to combat hunger in local communities

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Over the past year Northern Californian teens spearheaded a long-term social action project to collect 1,800 pounds of food for the hungry and learn about and raise awareness of food insecurity in their communities.

Started in May 2014 by United Synagogue Youth's New Frontier region, the *Yes We Can!* project spurred more than 250 USYers to amass some 2,000 pounds of canned goods for those in need and to collaborate with synagogues and non-profit organizations to fight hunger. In acknowledgement of their massive donation the USYers received an award from the Sacramento Food Bank.

"Social action is an extremely effective way to engage young people and show them their potential, regardless of age, to make positive social change," said New Frontier Regional Youth Director Sarah Miller. "The teens have truly achieved something remarkable and its impact has certainly been felt in the local community."

The teens' large scale effort to battle hunger has been a multifaceted initiative that's included several large canned food drives, synagogue-wide appeals, educational sessions and field trips, involvement in national hunger initiatives, and hands-on volunteerism at local food banks.

The project originated in April 2014 when Miller came across a call-to-action by Hazon, the Jewish organization dedicated to creating healthy and sustainable communities. Miller brought it to her teens who were shocked and moved by just how dire the problem of food insecurity was within their own communities.

"I was truly taken aback," said Jenny Gurev, 16, regional Social Action/Tikun Olam Vice President, and one of the main organizers of the initiative. "After learning just how many people face food insecurity, it made me realize how lucky I am, never having to worry about where my next meal will come from. *Yes We Can!* provided us an outlet to do something important in society."

One particularly impactful project the teens took part in was an eye-opening visit to the San Francisco/Marin Food Bank's Hunger 101 program, where each teen was assigned the persona of someone who uses the food bank and asked to make tough choices about how to feed "themselves and their families" with limited funds.

Another project the teens volunteered with was the Ecumenical Hunger Program, which assists local families in East Palo Alto and Menlo Park experiencing economic hardship. The teens spent time at a local food bank, stocking shelves and organizing food.

After the event, "It was no longer just about food drives," said Gurev, "It was about making a difference in our community and allowing fellow members of the community the access to a meal, which everyone should have."

This heightened awareness of the importance of social action was also reinforced for the teens through Jewish education. The teens studied Jewish responses to hunger such as the tradition of Pe'ah, giving gifts of food to the poor, and Leket, Israel's National Food Bank.

"Tikun olam and social action are important parts of the Jewish tradition, and we want to impart this to the next generation," said Miller. "My hope is that teens will see giving back, and the tangible results it yields, as an extension of their Judaism."

Yes We Can! culminates later this month, May 15-17, at New Frontier's Spring Convention with the Unicef Tap Project, which donates one days' worth of safe, clean water to children across the globe for every 15 minutes people stop using their cell phones. Tying in perfectly with Jewish identity, the teens will turn off their cell phones in observance of Shabbat, at the same time helping provide water to children.

Reflecting on the accomplishments of this past year Gurev said, "*Yes We Can!* allowed us, as teens, to get in-depth exposure and a better understanding of the issue at hand while providing an outlet for making real change."

She continued, "The lessons we learned are something we'll carry with us as we as become adults, both Jewishly and as global citizens, taking on responsibilities in our communities."

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About United Synagogue Youth

USY is Conservative Judaism's premiere youth group, run by its parent organization, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. With over 350 local chapters, USY boasts a membership of thousands of teens throughout the United States and Canada.

For more than 60 years USY has taught the young Jews the values and skills they need to become exceptional leaders in their religious and secular communities. USY's focus on leadership, social action, and relationship building has produced successful alumni with a deep sense of pride in and love for their Jewish identity.

Through year round programming and domestic and international travel opportunities, USY provides meaningful, immersive Jewish experiences, helping teens integrate Jewish rituals and values into their everyday lives.

For more information visit www.usy.org.

About United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism

The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism is a network of hundreds of North American congregations that are committed to a dynamic Judaism, which is learned and passionate, authentic and pluralistic, joyful and accessible, egalitarian or traditional.

It represents more than one million North American Jews. More information is available at www.uscj.org.