



PRESS RELEASE

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Former USYer Speaks to Over 700 Teens About His Experiences with Racism and Calls for Advocacy Amongst Young Leaders

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New York, NY (December 30, 2014)– United Synagogue Youth (USY) wrapped up its 64th International Convention this past week in Atlanta, Georgia, drawing on the city’s rich civil rights history for the convention’s educational theme, “Love Your Neighbor as Yourself.” It’s a message that is especially resonant after the recent upheaval over events in Ferguson, Missouri, and Staten Island, New York. But nowhere was it more compelling than Wednesday evening, when Yehudah Webster, 22, a former USYer who is both black and Jewish, spoke to the teens.

“Racism has black and brown people in America in a chokehold,” Webster said, evoking the death of Eric Garner; “Sadly this systemic racism goes so deep [that] not even the Jewish community is exempt from it.”

After a day in which the USYers toured the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historical Site, visited the Ebenezer Baptist Church, and heard from civil rights activist, the Reverend Graham Williams, Webster gave the day’s programming a deeply personal touch, speaking to the teens as one of their own.

He talked about the events that took place on Staten Island, expressed his own fear of the police, and relayed heartbreaking stories of racial epithets and stereotypes that other teens, including some of his Jewish peers, had imposed on him growing up.

Born in Guyana and raised in Newark, New Jersey, Webster grew up in USY and is currently the Assistant Regional Director for METNY (Metropolitan New York) Region. He was raised in an observant Jewish household, the entire family having converted to Judaism in 2000 when he was eight. He attended Hebrew School, Ramah sleepaway camps, and USY. However, as he describes it, he could not escape being recognized only for the color of his skin.

Now he views the past as an opportunity to educate. “I try to use any moment like that as a moment to broaden people’s perspectives and pull them aside and say this is why this is offensive or hurtful,” he said after the speech.

“I realized the best way to make this real for the USYers was to share a bit of my experience within their community, the Jewish community, and then link that experience to what’s going on in the world right now. Because the Garner situation isn’t an isolated one—sadly it’s the experience of the black community on a day to day [basis].”

Webster impressed on the teens that civil rights and the struggle for equality are not artifacts to be studied in a museum, but an ongoing struggle in which they must all participate. He urged them to draw lessons from his stories and transform them into advocacy.

For instance, he said, they should get involved in their home communities, use social media as a vehicle for spreading awareness, and employ the leadership skills they learn in USY to impact the world around them.

“USY, you are the future...the youth decides what tomorrow looks like,” Webster told the USYers. “Do all that you can to help release the chokehold on the black and brown communities, so that everyone, and I mean everyone, in America can freely breathe.”

Reflecting on his message, Webster was hopeful about what USYers might take from it. “[Civil rights] is not a moment, it’s a movement. I’m thankful I was able to create the moment of impact on [the teens], but I gave them very specific marching orders of how they can engage because this [message needs to] carry on.”