

Catholic teens get burning Jewish questions answered at conference

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At 17, Kate Storey-Fisher knows she is not an expert in Judaism.

But being Jewish is part of her everyday life, from traveling to Israel and celebrating holidays with her family, to teaching third grade Hebrew school at her synagogue, San Francisco's Congregation Emanu-El.

These experiences gave the Lick-Wilmerding High School junior the confidence to help lead a workshop on Judaism for non-Jewish teens — and dispel a few stereotypes in the process.

"I was asked, 'Are you allowed to date?' 'Can Jews eat meat?' and 'How do you feel about the Holocaust?' " she said. "Judaism is such a big part of my life, but many of the Catholic students had no idea."



Jennifer Katz (from left) joins Samuel Rothmann and Taylor Edelhart to light Havdallah candles during the closing ceremony of the Conference on Judaism.

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Storey-Fisher was one of several local high school students who planned and participated in the Conference on Judaism, a seminar inspired by Catholic students who wanted to know more about the Jewish faith. It took place Nov. 21 at Mercy High School in San Francisco.

The Curriculum Initiative, a New York-based Jewish organization that serves private schools by providing students with extracurricular programming and teachers with professional development opportunities, organized the conference. TCI operates in three other regions: Boston, Baltimore and the Bay Area.

Leading the youth-coordinating efforts was the Jewish Teen Coalition, a cohort of Bay Area students that plans programs rooted in social action and community service.

Approximately 180 students registered for the free symposium, along with 25 parents and educators. Adrian Schrek, regional director for TCI San Francisco, said she had a waiting list of about 40 kids, attributing the conference's popularity to its student-driven planning process.

Teens took photos, taught Hebrew songs during opening and closing ceremonies and played an active role in ensuring the conference provided a safe space for open dialogue.

"What we had yesterday was beautiful," Schrek said following the seminar, "but it's not just about the end product. We had so many people involved in the process, doing something that served the entire community. The Jewish students I talked to felt like they were giving back."

Students and educators from public, private and parochial schools in the Bay Area were involved in the planning, representing Menlo School in Atherton, Lick-Wilmerding, St. Ignatius College Preparatory and Mercy, all in San Francisco, and Saint Mary's High School in Berkeley, to name a few.

The workshops at the conference centered on topics integral to the understanding of Jewish ritual and culture, such as "What is a bar mitzvah?" "Why do Jews care about Israel?" and "What is the Jewish position on Proposition 8?"

Each session was created with the goal of employing Judaism as a lens through which to explore universal issues of faith, spirituality and practice, and the way they play out in the lives of young people today.

"The day's material made all of my teaching in the classroom real and concrete," said Lauren Guerra, who teaches an introductory class in religion and another on Hebrew and Christian scripture at Mercy High. "There are so many misconceptions among the world's religions, so it's important to hear people's stories about their faiths. The world would be a better place if we talked to each other more."

Movement artist Julie Emden led students in a yoga-inspired class based on teachings from the V'Ahavta prayer, while TCI Executive Director Adam Gaynor illuminated the differences among Judaism's denominations. There was also a student-led workshop that had Jewish teens from different backgrounds in conversation with non-Jewish students, who peppered them with questions relating to Israel, the Holocaust and everyday life.

"Religion isn't something we talk about at school," Storey-Fisher said. "This was a good opportunity to begin the interfaith dialogue and answer questions that I don't normally think about."

Rick Concoff, director of teen programs and education at the Sonoma County Jewish Community Center, led the class, "Mazel Tov: You're a Man/Woman!" He addressed all aspects of having a bar or bat mitzvah during a lively conversation based on the rite of passage.

While he's taken part in other Jewish retreats, conclaves and events, Concoff said this conference was unique in that it brought together Jewish educators, community leaders and students to "demystify Judaism in a positive way that would encourage tolerance and respect for diversity."

"The fact that it was so well attended is an indication of how much this interaction is needed," he added, "and what responsibility we have as educators to sponsor and promote it."