

At Jewbilee, teens learn that they count

By Judy Bolton-Fasman
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If someone asked me to describe The Curriculum Initiative in four words, I'd say "Hillel for high school." To be exact, it's a resource on all things Jewish for students in private and preparatory high schools – teenagers who aren't quite old enough to build houses in Central America, but need equally fulfilling ways to explore their Jewish identity.

The group last weekend held a student retreat in Cambridge called Jewbilee. At first glance the title may sound a bit kitschy, but consider the pun for a moment, and like time-lapse photography, what emerges are: a deep respect for young adult passion, serious commitment to Jewish continuity and the light of hope that this venture is here to stay.

As I sat among the large group of teens in the Cambridge Marriott last weekend, I thought of my blip of an effort to bring together Jews and Christians when I was in high school. It's not surprising that I was the only Jewish student to graduate with Mount Saint Joseph Academy's Class of 1978. ("The Mount" I went to was in Connecticut and not to be confused with Mount Saint Joseph Academy in Massachusetts). I went on a dare and ended up loving the place. It was the '70s, and the nuns had traded in their habits for civilian dress. The younger nuns were open to social justice and, it turns out, the ecumenicism I brought to the school.



Sister Mary Carney and I were pretty much on our own when, in my senior year, she and I planned a Thanksgiving program with a priest, a minister and a rabbi. The first thing we did was to level the playing field and hold the event in the cafeteria instead of the Mount's stained-glass chapel.

*Cambridge School of Weston and Westover Academy students enjoying Friday night Shabbat dinner.
PHOTO BY ORETT ROBINSON*

I can't recall exactly what we did during that ecumenical Thanksgiving celebration, but I can tell you that it left me feeling hopeful and lighter and proud to be a Jew. Classmates who felt sorry for me because I didn't celebrate Christmas appreciated me differently after they met my rabbi. Here was a modern man, fluent in the language of shared spirituality and a local pioneer in interfaith dialogue.

Enter The Curriculum Initiative three decades later. At Jewbilee's plenary session, I listened to a rabbi, a priest and an imam talk about what divides and unites people of faith. A rabbi, a priest and an imam – it sounds like the beginning of a corny joke. But there was nothing trivial or silly about bringing these three religious leaders together to challenge their young audience to think critically about their spiritual lives, their religious traditions and their legacies.

You know kids are engaged when one of them asks the clergy on the panel, "How do you stay with your religion even when aspects of it disturb you?" Without missing a beat, Reverend Walter Cuenin – Catholic chaplain at Brandeis University – gave a telling example. One could disagree with going to war in Iraq while still being a patriotic American.

Dr. Imam Tala Eid – the Muslim chaplain at Brandeis University and the executive director of the Boston Islamic Initiative – marveled at our country's grand, diverse landscape and the freedom to traverse it without checkpoints or visas. But Imam Eid wasn't conjuring a fantasy United States. Born in Lebanon, he knows about civil war and that short trips in miles can become arduous journeys in the Middle East.

Rabbi Or Rose of Hebrew College urged attendees to undertake deep, transformative work of nourishing faith. For Rabbi Rose, that work begins with confronting the hard stories of genocide in the Torah.

If someone further challenged me to describe TCI's work in just a word, I'd say "holy." Another word that comes to my mind is "vivid." Holy and vivid – a dynamic combination empowering Jews attending independent schools to leave lasting imprints at their respective institutions. With guidance from TCI, many of these schools now host unprecedented black-Jewish dialogues, "lunch and learns" about Judaism and social justice initiatives led by Jews and their peers.

Rabbi Jonah Pesner, Jewbilee's keynote speaker and director of Just Congregations for United Reform Judaism, thrilled his young audience by making them aware of their individual and collective power. When Rabbi Pesner talked about harnessing one's power, he brought to mind the famous Eleanor Roosevelt quote, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent."

His own commitment to social justice harkens back to riding the No. 4 subway from lower Manhattan to the North Bronx to attend the stellar Bronx High School of Science. Anyone who's done that ride has seen some of the toughest neighborhoods in our country. When Pesner looked out the window, he saw the South Bronx burning.

Twenty years later Rabbi Pesner got off the subway with colleagues to tour new houses in the South Bronx. Not a house or two or even three built by a charity group, but blocks of affordable, safe housing. As he told his story, I'll bet that he made everyone in the room yearn for the thrill of tikkun olam – repairing the world.

I like to joke that for all sorts of reasons I'd want to come back as one of my children. Here's an addendum to my wish: As a young Jew, I would also want The Curriculum Initiative showing me that I have the power to change the world.