FALL

Litbits 2004

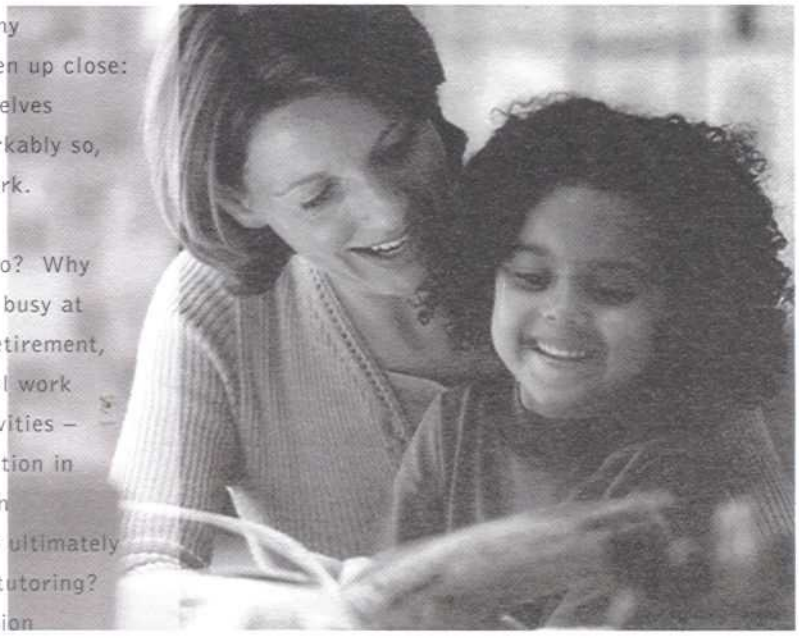
WINWIN

by Leonard Fein

...Volunteering in so personal a way helps answer the pervasive human quest for meaning...

Elsewhere in this issue of Litbits, you will find a report on a recent evaluation of its work by our Bay Area affiliate, which services San Francisco, the East Bay, and the Peninsula region. (We eagerly await its expansion, as yet merely a Bostonian's dream, to Napa Valley.) The evaluation focuses on the volunteers themselves rather than on the children whom they tutor, and was executed by JESNA, Jewish Educational Services of North America.

While we're beginning to get some evidence (beyond the anecdotal) regarding the effects of tutoring on the children – our clients, as it were – serious and comprehensive evaluation of those effects remains exceedingly difficult to obtain. Such evidence as we do have, along with the anecdotes, underscores the value our tutors provide, and we will report on what we know about that in a future issue. Here we have a different focus: now, for the first time, we have a serious study of the benefits of our work to the tutors themselves. And the study confirms what so many of us have by now seen up close: our tutors feel themselves enriched, often remarkably so, by their volunteer work.



Why should that be so? Why should busy people – busy at work, busy in their retirement, busy with their school work and after-school activities – find so much satisfaction in the difficult and often frustrating (although ultimately rewarding) work of tutoring? The specific information gleaned from the Bay Area study is presented (in highly abbreviated form) in the article on page 3. I want here to propose the larger answer, the answer that is confirmed for me each and every time (19 so far, and counting) I meet with our tutors around the country. It will perhaps sound

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ASSOCIATION OF JEWISH FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S AGENCIES

B'NAI BRITH

CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN RABBIS

FELLOWSHIP OF RECONSTRUCTIONIST CONGREGATIONS

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WINWIN, CONT.

sappy, I know – but for all that it may be, there is a very real sense in which volunteering in so personal a way helps answer the pervasive human quest for meaning. For the most part, we read the newspapers – or worse, watch the 11 p.m. local newscast – and learn of terrible things: lies, fires, murders, wars, bribes, every manner of sorrow and horror known to our species. Every day, beyond our capacity to absorb. And with regard to almost all of what we read and hear, there is the sense that we can do nothing, save perhaps by our biennial vote, to help, to ameliorate, to repair.

Now come all these kids, these innocent kids, each and every one of whom deserves a chance at dignity. And we are invited to play a part, however modest, in making that chance come real, come true. Suddenly, we become part of the larger world we inhabit, suddenly we are rendered potent. And as suddenly, we help define the texture of American Jewish life. Not for nothing was I asked, during my recent trip to Israel, to help launch a literacy program there. Word has spread and with it a clearer sense of just what we mean by the term "Jewish values." (A joke making the rounds in Israel a while back: The American Jewish tourist asks his tour guide, "How do you say tikun olam in Hebrew?")

Perhaps that's why, of all the things that touch me as I meet with our affiliates and with the tutors themselves, the most touching of all is seeing an older generation – people in their 80s and sometimes even in their 90s – next to 8th graders, all volunteers, all engaged in this sacred work. From generation to generation. Ken yirbu – may their numbers increase. When **NJCL** was founded, we really hadn't given much thought to the meaning the program would have for the volunteers, and we'd given no thought at all to the miracle of its intergenerational character. It didn't take long for both these aspects to be revealed – and now, thanks to the folks in the Bay Area and the folks from JESNA, the supporting information has been nailed down.

What a joy!

LEONARD FEIN IS THE FOUNDER OF NJCL.



meanwhile, THE TUTORS...

In a 42 page (plus appendices) report prepared by Jewish Educational Services of North America (JESNA), **the Bay Area JCL** provides us a detailed examination of the impact of its program both on the tutors and on the Jewish community itself. Specifically, the study focused on the retention of volunteers; on the impact of their participation on the Jewish identities of the volunteers; on the goodwill generated towards the Jewish community; on the overall level of satisfaction with JCL and its staff. These areas were studied through telephone interviews with school and partner-site coordinators, as also by questionnaires sent to both returning and non-retained volunteers. (The study was supported by the San Francisco Federation's Jewish Community Endowement Fund.)

Other affiliates will doubtless find the report of interest and of value in their own work, especially as it contains recommendations on how to make a successful program even better. Here, we provide only a sketch of some of its highlights.



Perhaps the most exhilarating aspect of the report is that which deals with the reactions of school site coordinators. They were "overwhelmingly extremely positive," repeatedly describing JCL as "the least bureaucratic, most user-friendly volunteer organization" they'd ever worked with. As to their assessment of the volunteers themselves, the data are equally positive. The words (unsolicited) that recurred were: "caring, punctual, reliable, dedicated, giving, committed, effective, and responsible."

The Bay Area JCL retains 50-55 percent of its volunteer tutors from year to year; those who don't sign up for a repeat typically drop out because of changes in work schedules or family status. The program clearly generates goodwill towards the Jewish community – and this not only among the non-Jewish beneficiaries of its services (e.g., school site coordinators) – but also among those of its beneficiaries who are Jewish. Along with the volunteers themselves, they feel a growing sense of pride in this commitment of the Jewish community. JCL is seen as providing "a focused means of actualizing distinctly Jewish commitments." (Note, please, the word – "distinctly," not "distinctively." Others share those same commitments, which is all to the good given the need, given our numbers.)

Among the many interesting and suggestive findings of the study, we learn that a substantial majority of volunteers belong to some other Jewish organization – yet a significant minority do not. Among those who don't "re-up," about a quarter become involved in another Jewish organization subsequent to their time with JCL.

We hope to make the full study available on the NJCL website – or distribute it on our list serve—in the near future. Check it out; by the time you get this newsletter, that may already have happened. And thanks again to the Bay Area JCL and to JESNA. We love good news.

Show & Kvell

While most, if not all, of our affiliates send students home with a gift book for the summer, Isobel Goldman, coordinator of the **Rochester JCL**, has added a colorful twist. "More than 65% of children in the city of Rochester attend schools in high poverty neighborhoods," she says. "The majority of these children leave school and go home without books or even a box of crayons." Goldman decided to tackle both deficits. Last spring, some 180 JCL volunteers gathered more than 6,000 gift books for distribution to youngsters in 37 schools.

In addition, as an offshoot of her JCL work, Goldman has for the last two years organized The Crayon Project, providing students with a box of crayons and a unique coloring book designed by twelve Rochester artists. Last spring 12,000 boxes of crayons and coloring books were distributed for summer use.

"Literacy and creativity are both empowering for young students," Goldman points out. "It's important to give them opportunities to succeed."

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How can our volunteers expand the impact of tutoring a single child? Advocacy is the answer, according to Tammy Alfred Steinman, coordinator of the **Greater Boston JCL**. "By taking action, we can help make substantive changes on a system-wide level," she asserts. To that end our Boston affiliate has created the Save Our Schools web page at www.jcrcboston.org/literacy.

Timely articles and sample letters to legislators make it easy for JCL volunteers to learn about the issues and make their voices heard beyond the classroom. The web page also offers links to other groups doing ongoing educational advocacy.

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Contents of this snazzy lunch box are designed to whet the appetites of company executives being courted for **Koreh LA's** corporate program. Included is a spongy, squeezable apple (for releasing tension) and a brochure for the program, through which employers allow their staff to train and tutor during the workday. So far, 70 employees from eight participating companies (ranging from law firms to a manufacturer of hi-tech equipment) have been trained and are tutoring public school students.



A new affiliate joins the NJCL, adding to our already formidable presence in Connecticut. Lauri Lowell, coordinator of the new **New Haven JCL**, reports that, "We spent eight months researching the best school with which to partner. We were looking for a strong principal and an organized, supportive environment." Christopher Columbus Family Academy, a bilingual school with a large Hispanic population, turned out to be the lucky winner. Principal Miriam Camacho has been instrumental in providing volunteers with cultural sensitivity training, using the school's impressive cadre of professional staff and consultants.

The New Haven JCL enjoyed another stroke of good fortune when the Women's Division of the Jewish Federation of Greater New Haven selected the JCL tutoring opportunity as its new community service project. "These professional, experienced and warm hearted women are getting us off to a terrific start," Lowell notes.

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Elsewhere in Connecticut, outstanding work by the **Danbury JCL** in four local schools has prompted a fifth school to request the team's services. The 50 reading partners who participate in the program were honored recently at a volunteer appreciation luncheon. Keynote speaker Darla Show, Professor of Education at Western Connecticut State University, shared her expertise on children's books that deal with diversity.

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One synagogue can make an enormous difference in the lives of young students, according to Vida Barron, chair of the book drive committee for the **Hartford JCL**. When committee member Bea Mitlak approached the staff at Emanuel Synagogue for support

SUMMER PROGRAMS AND FALL INITIATIVES: A ROUND-UP

TEENS FROM THE EMANUEL SYNAGOGUE CONDUCTED A "BOOK SWEEP" AT BARNES AND NOBLE IN SUPPORT OF THE HARTFORD JCL'S RECENT BOOK DRIVE. NEARLY 2,000 BOOKS HAVE BEEN DONATED BY OUR AFFILIATE SINCE JULY 2000.



FRED WEISMAN, A VOLUNTEER WITH THE DANBURY JCL, GAVE FRAMED COPIES OF THIS PHOTO TO HIS READING PARTNERS.



in the effort, the response was effusive. Emanuel's chapter of United Synagogue Youth turned tzedakah into a party through a "Book Sweep" held at Barnes and Noble. The teens divided into teams to locate books from wish lists provided by the affiliate's participating schools. By the end of the evening, the group purchased 63 new books for at-risk students in the Hartford program.

Meanwhile, Emanuel's younger pupils (kindergarten-2nd grade) designated the JCL as the recipient of their tzedakah donations, providing $150 for the gift books. Hartford JCL volunteers met with all of these Emanuel students and discussed the ways their contributions help other boys and girls.

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Stamford Mayor Dannel P. Malloy spoke recently at a tutor recognition program honoring volunteers with five years of service with the **Stamford JCL**. Members of the Board of Education, as well as professional staff representing all eight participating schools, were in attendance and our affiliate has been asked to expand the program to Stamford's four remaining schools. The team, now 100 strong, working with 200 pupils, recently earned the Mayor's Youth Empowerment Award and was featured in Stamford's local newspaper, The Advocate. Interesting note: The Stamford JCL enriched its end-of-the-year book giving by holding parties at each school and inviting the students' parents to attend. Parental participation in encouraging literacy is vital to a child's reading success (see page 7).

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The **NJCL** web page is sporting a new look and new features. Visitors to www.njcl.net will find a more detailed history and mission statement and photos from our affiliates, as well as direct links to each affiliate and other related websites. The format also includes Litbits on-line and a listserve function enabling affiliates to share ideas and resources.

Meanwhile, plans are under way for the 2005 NJCL Institute, to be held next February in Washington, D.C. The program will draw on input from all affiliates, including the 27 participants from 17 affiliates across the country who attended last February's Institute. That gathering was held in Boston, in tandem with the annual Plenum of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA). Our delegates were thus able to attend a variety of presentations by national and international leaders on a wide variety of topics, including some directly related to our literacy work. Issues such as poverty, immigration and public school integration were all part of the JCPA agenda. During NJCL workshops, coalition representatives shared training materials, assessment tools, ideas and resources.

PHOENIX RISING

Day School Students Help Elevate Reading Skills

You might not carry coals to Newcastle or a sandwich to a banquet, but what about paper goods to a Bar and Bat' Mitzvah? Regarding the latter, guests were pleased to oblige at the smachot of Adam and Dana Paikowsky in Phoenix last spring.

The twins and their middle school classmates at the King David School provided weekly literacy tutoring for struggling-pupils at The Palomino School, a Title 1, K-3 institution, in a program established by Cathy Wolf, **Phoenix JCL** coordinator. While day school students across the country participate in a variety of JCL tutoring programs, the Paikowsky siblings felt that the experience demanded something more. Their response may have been triggered on Day One of the program, when the Palomino principal, Dr. Ana Ramos-Pell, detailed the challenges her students face: parents in jail, limited English skills, poverty. Adam and Dana, along with classmates Chanel Leibsohn and Samantha Shulman, chose to build their Bar/Bat Mitzvah tzedakah projects around the academic and personal needs of their new reading buddies.

"The kids developed these tzedakah projects all on their own," kvells Avi Marcovitz, principal at King David. "They approached the principal for a list of specific items needed by the school and its students. Then they launched collections to meet those needs."

Adam Paikowsky focused on the paper-goods portion of Palomino's wish list. He and his sister placed collection boxes at several locations, including the hotel where their Bar and Bat' Mitzvah party was held. Dana amassed backpacks, binders and toys. "I enjoy tutoring so much," she explains. "The kids are totally happy to see you and work with you on their stories. I thought they deserved more than they had."



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ADAM AND DANA PAIKOWSKY; CHANEL LEIBSOHN AND SAMANTHA SHULMAN

Samantha Shulman concurs. "Sometimes I don't get what I want, but they have nothing. I don't need all the extras. I can donate the money." Her gift box also included picture books and stuffed animals. Meanwhile, Chanel Liebsohn placed an eye-catching collection box wrapped in pink and purple paper at the community center. The box was soon filled with shoes and socks, computer paper and bathroom tissue.

"Matching day school students with young readers is a wonderful shiddach," proclaims Wolf, whose program includes two additional day schools working in four of the city's most challenged public schools. "The Title 1 schools and their students benefit from the extra hands and the young volunteers are enriched by the opportunity to help." The entire effort is coordinated and funded by the Jewish Federation of Greater Phoneix. A grant from the Lodestar Foundation funds the busses that transport tutors to and from their host schools.

Markovitz is enthusiastic about the spin-off effects of this JCL initiative. Incorporating tutoring into the curriculum enhances his ability to model experiential learning and tikun olam. "This is to me what makes a Jewish day school. If you're going to be a Jew, tzedakah is part of the day."

Moreover, says Markovitz, several day school students with behavioral issues emerged as real leaders in helping younger kids. "My students keep looking for ways to expand their commitment. 'What can we do?' they ask. 'When can we start?'"

LEVELING *the reading* field:

AFFILIATES HELP PRESCHOOLERS START KINDERGARTEN ON TRACK



HARTFORD, AMONG SEVERAL AFFILIATES IN THE COALITION, PLACES VOLUNTEERS WITH PRESCHOOL CHILDREN.

"When children walk in the door on the first day of kindergarten, what should they know already?" Ask this question of Mary Mindess and be prepared for an earful.

An expert on kindergarten education and Professor of Early Childhood Education for Lesley University in Cambridge, MA, Mindess has for 41 years coordinated the New England Kindergarten Conference, serving thousands of professionals from across the country and abroad.

So what's her answer? Should the child know how to hold a book, how to sing the alphabet song, how to count to three? Mindess challenges us to look closer and sooner. "Success begins in the cradle," she says, and for many of America's newborns the cradle is cracked. Experience with communication and building trusting relationships form the foundation for reading readiness, according to Mindess (and countless others in the field). "Too many four-year-olds have never experienced a two-way conversation with an interested adult. Maybe they were taught to be seen and not heard. Maybe they've only received orders and commands."

Involvement in communication – talk, dramatic play, music and art – plays an important role, as does experience with the world at large. "Research keeps reminding us that the wiring is laid down early, and while there's no real substitute for early language experiences in the home, every effort to foster literacy development is worth its weight in gold," she points out. Volunteers who are kind and reliable, who take cues from the child, can help fill in the gaps. "Talking and engaging in playful activities – using a book as the centerpiece – can help position a child for success."

This message resonates with Gale Shapiro, coordinator of the **Hartford JCL**, whose Preschool Pals initiative at the Bloomfield Early Childhood Center (BECC) recently completed its third year. Ann Cohen, an expert with more than two decades of experience in preschool and elementary education (and a JCL volunteer), tailored Hartford's highly interactive training program for volunteers at the preschool level. "She had us all singing along, doing the hand gestures, getting the feel of participating in the story," Shapiro recalls. In addition to learning playful ways to engage children in read-aloud activities, trainees received a detailed kit describing appropriate books for this age group and a troubleshooting guide for addressing petite attention spans.

Preschool Pals earns high marks from the professionals at BECC. One teacher pointed out the value of one-on-one reading for her students, particularly in encouraging conversation about the story and its characters.

Still, like all programs associated with the NJCL, the benefits work in multiple directions. BECC staff members were so impressed with the training program that they encouraged parents of the preschoolers to participate in the instruction. One parent who went through the training now volunteers with the Hartford JCL.

And, since the Bloomfield preschool operated from 7:30 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., Shapiro recognized an opportunity to broaden the pool of volunteers. "The extended hours enabled more adults to volunteer at the beginning or end of their workday. It also allowed us to recruit middle and high school students who could not volunteer during school hours." In addition, Shapiro developed an eight-week tutoring block,

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

making the program attractive for teens who were unable to make a weekly commitment for the entire school year.

School Principal Cynthia James has nothing but gratitude for the volunteers' contribution. "...if anyone asks you, 'What do you do?" please look the person directly in the eye and tell him or her that you are a literacy angel or a warrior for literacy." Last year a total of 20 angel warriors conducted some 175 one-on-one reading sessions with 65 children in four preschool classes.

Meanwhile, west-coast warriors for literacy are creating their own pilot program to address the preschool challenge through a Head Start grant from the Los Angeles County Office of Education. **Koreh LA** is charged with recruiting and training 160 new volunteers, including parents of Head Start children and high school students looking to earn community service credits. The tutors spend one hour each week working one-on-one with a series of Head Start youngsters in four different locations.

Like her colleagues in Connecticut, Miryam Jannol, literacy trainer for the new cadre of LA tutors, emphasizes the role of talk and play activities in introducing the joy of reading to preschool kids. "There is some overlap in the training of tutors for preschool and the training of tutors for the lower grades, but the preschool tutors are the only ones who need to know how to make playdough," she chuckles.

Jannol appreciates the detailed 'child outcomes' outlined by Head Start for the new program, from listening and understanding, speaking and communicating, to associating sounds with written words and developing a love of books. Since most of the Head Start participants in the program come from homes where English is spoken – if at all – as a second language, tutors will encourage a "Total Physical Response " to the learning experience: touching and feeling story-related props, using sounds and gestures, delving into the pictures.

"We train people who are flexible in body and mind, who are patient, adore kids, and thrill to the joy of discovery," Jonnell explains. "Preschool is a great place to focus our energy," adds Hartford's Shapiro. Our goal at NJCL is for all students to be reading at grade level by 4th grade. "The earlier we offer our support to the students, the greater the likelihood of their success."

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