

5-12-1995

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Steve Feldman

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## Recommended Citation

Feldman, Steve, "Learning by doing: Out of the classroom and into the community" (1995). *Service Learning, General*. Paper 88.  
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# JEWISH Exponent

Jewish Exponent 5/12/1995 V.197; N.19 p. 6

## Learning by doing: Out of the classroom and into the community

### Author

Feldman, Steve

### Article

Peter Etsteen's white-whiskered face lit up when he saw his friends Barry Cohen and Adam Levinstein come into the Neuman Senior Center gymnasium on a recent Sunday morning.

Simultaneously, smiles broke across Barry's and Adam's inquisitive faces.

All three knew they were in for some good conversation.

Adam and Barry, both 13, are enrolled in one of Beth Margolis-Rupp's service learning classes at Gratz College's Jewish Community High School, an education program that supplements their regular schooling.

On Sunday a month during the school year, they and their classmates travel to the Jewish Community Centers of Greater Philadelphia facility in the Northeast to brighten the day of the 94-year-old Etsteen and other seniors.

At the same time, they are learning about their heritage and gaining experience to make a difference in the Jewish community when they become adults.

While in many circles an age gap such as this might be a barrier, for this threesome it is an attraction. Both sides give as well as receive.

Etsteen revels in sharing his experiences with the boys and recalling his own youth. Barry, Adam and the dozens of other students in the JCHS service-learning classes learn by working with elderly and disabled Jews, and by tutoring homeless youths as part of the elective course.

Service learning is a cutting-edge method of teaching that combines education with volunteerism, it adherents say.

### Incumbent on Jews

"Service learning is intrinsically Jewish," said Margolis-Rupp, who brought the program to Gratz JCHS four years ago. "It is incumbent upon us, as Jews, to do."

Jim Kielsmeier, president of the National Youth Leadership Council and a pioneer in the service-learning movement, explained the genesis and benefits of the program.

"I think there's been a lot of frustration at the classroom level," said Kielsmeier, who is from Roseville, Minn.

"Teachers talk. Students listen. The students have no investment in what they learn and how they learn it. This is combined with the wave of interest in service."

Getting people active in groups such as the Peace Corps and VISTA "needs to be built within the growing-up experience" the way athletics are a routine part of school life, Kielsmeier said.

At some schools, service learning is mandatory. Although the eight service-learning classes at JCHS are optional, Margolis-Rupp said they are always fully enrolled.

"It doesn't need to be made a requirement - they volunteer," Margolis-Rupp said. "They sign up in droves."

Indeed, the classes are more popular than other electives, such as art or current events.

Most students take a service-learning course in addition to their other academic classes at JCHS. For others, this is

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their only class at JCHS. Margolis-Rupp said graduates can earn a service-learning certificate along with their diplomas.

#### Working with disabled

One of her classes works with clients at the Neuman Senior Center once a month. Another group of her students goes to Elwyn Inc. twice a month to work with the disabled. Yet another group tutors youths at the St. Barnabas Mission for the Homeless.

Five classes are involved with the Cook-for-a-Friend program at the Neuman Senior Center, providing meals for the elderly or shut-ins.

In addition to Margolis-Rupp, three other teachers at the community-wide high school have service-learning classes.

Gratz JCHS receives a grant from the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia to fund some of the program.

"This is a great avenue to touch base with our youngsters in the community on a different level," said Dr. Uziel Adini, director of Gratz JCHS. "I am giving [the service-learning program] my full encouragement."

Adini noted that the Talmud "says that studying is great because it leads to action. With [service learning], you can see the fruit of your study in action before your eyes."

Moreover, he said, "it ensures [that] a link between those kids and the Jewish community continues. They become knowledgeable and committed Jews."

The program at Neuman is not your typical intergenerational exchange.

"I think it's the most wonderful thing I ever saw, and I've been here a long time," Peter Etsteen said.

He comes to the center for Shabbat dinner and on Sundays. But the one Sunday a month when the JCHS students visit is special - for him and for the students.

"They come here and enjoy themselves and see things. It's very important," said Etsteen, who grew up in Syracuse, N.Y., where he used to own a grocery store and was also a painter.

Sometimes, the three of them shoot pool.

#### Sharing memories

On this day, Etsteen was telling the youths about things he did when he was their age.

"I think it's fun," Adam said. "It's neat to meet older people and listen to their stories."

"We meet new friends" at the center, Barry said. "I've learned so much. Peter was a great artist who traveled around the world. I'm surprised he was so active as a kid."

"It's really important that we're coming here and enjoy doing it," Adam added. "If I get older, I'd love to have a program like this."

Etsteen was lavish in his praise. "You don't know how much I enjoy you people coming here. You can't even imagine it," he said.

Teacher Margolis-Rupp has witnessed the bonding between the generations.

"It's not like the kids are coming to take care of these people. They are a link to the past and the future," Margolis-Rupp said.

"It's a touching thing that teenagers choose this," observed Joan Leoff, program director at Neuman.

In another part of the gym, 79-year-old dynamo Golda Goldman was leading a half-dozen teenage girls from JCHS through an impromptu Jane Fonda-like aerobics workout.

Elsewhere in the building, other teenage boys and girls were helping Lillian Weiss, 87, prepare lunch and set the five tables where they would eat. Neuman clients such as Ruth and Irving Parnes were sharing their experiences with the teens.

"I keep coming back because I've met a lot of seniors," said 15-year-old Sarah Kadis, who is in her second year in the

class. "There is a special relationship that we have.

"My grandparents live far away, so I don't get to see them. So I have grandparents here."

Goldman is equally thankful for the program.

"I always like to be with the young. It makes me feel young [and] gives me energy and so much pleasure," she said.

Befriending the senior adults who use the Neuman Center is only one outlet for JCHS's service-learning curriculum. Another set of students have developed bonds with 35 Jewish residents at Elwyn Inc., an institution for the disabled near Media.

Among the students are brother and sister Matt and Janel Swaye, and Martin Stone.

Janel, who is in ninth grade and who is also in the service-learning class that works at Neuman Senior Center, said she appreciates "the one-on-one interaction, working together and solving problems."

Through the class, she said, she is "developing leadership skills." The people at Elwyn "enjoy our company and appreciate that we're there."

Doing something Jewish

Her brother Matt noted that he is active in service programs at Friends Central School, where he is in 11th grade, but they are more secular in nature. He said he felt the need to do something Jewish.

From his activity, he gets "instant gratification. We make a difference. We get people out of their rooms."

Many Elwyn residents, he said, do not get many visitors.

Matt has been involved in the service-learning class at Elwyn for three years. An added attraction for him, he said, is "the collaboration with the students and the teacher."

Martin, an 11th-grader at Strath Haven High School who is hearing-impaired, said, through sign-language interpreter Ethyl Treatman, "I really enjoy working with the deaf resident, because we are similar in being disabled. It's great to teach him about Jewish values.

"I was able to improve his self-esteem. It's great to be able to see a smile on his face as I left."

But, Martin continued, "it's very difficult to work with him because he relies only on sign language, and I just learned sign language last year."

Total involvement

According to Margolis-Rupp, the class that is active at Elwyn is more complex than the others. The students plan the activities they will do at the facility, and they attend a companion course dealing with the issues they face in the field, such as leadership, diversity, sensitivity and public speaking. Furthermore, they are required to keep a journal.

Most of the teens in the JCHS service-learning classes said their friends respect their choice to be volunteers and make a difference in someone else's life.

Some acknowledged that they enrolled in the class at the urging of their parents but enjoy it now.

"Parent feedback has been really powerful," Margolis-Rupp said. She explained that because the parents are the ones who drive the students to the programs, their support is crucial.

Margolis-Rupp said she hopes that more Jewish teens decide to make this commitment, as the service-learning program may expand into Center City shortly.

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