

Students look to the past for Learnathon

Sheri Shefa
Staff Reporter

The students at Eitz Chaim Day School in Toronto will keep a decades-long tradition alive as they prepare for a fundraising initiative called the Learnathon.

"This year, we're going to be raising money for UJA [Federation of Greater Toronto], and we're doing it in memory of children who were killed in the Holocaust," said Rabbi Isser Pliner, dean of Eitz Chaim Schools.

Rabbi Pliner explained that on Oct. 24, students will begin canvassing the community to be sponsored for a learning marathon that will be held Nov. 12 at the schools.

"The Learnathon that Eitz Chaim runs has probably been going on for more than 30 years. It was really Eitz Chaim's response to the UJA Walkathon. Since Eitz Chaim has school on Sunday [when the walkathon is held], our administration suggested that we would have the kids learn instead," he said.

About 400 students from grades 5 to 8 at all three campuses are participating in this initiative.

The Holocaust theme was chosen this year to try to make the project more meaningful to the students, Rabbi Pliner said.



A scene from last year's Learnathon at Eitz Chaim Day Schools' Patricia campus

"The program has kind of dwindled over the years, and I think what has been lacking was perhaps a lack of relevance," he said.

"UJA should be very relevant, and we try our best to promote them as much as we can, but it's hard to get excited about an organization. So you need to get the kids excited about something. If there is a tragedy that is happening in the world, the kids can come out and raise money for it."

Last year, the children raised funds in support of the victims of Hurricane Sandy,

and in 2006, students collected donations for United Hazalah of Israel, an independent, volunteer emergency medical services organization.

"They had to replace a lot of their equipment following the 2006 Lebanon incursion, and we were able to rally around raising money to buy things that

were necessary," Rabbi Pliner recalled.

He said this year, to honour the child victims of the Holocaust, each student will receive a short biography of a child who was killed.

"The students will learn a little about a child, but they will also be learning about different aspects of the Holocaust and aspects of the Torah and Tanach that are associated with events like the Holocaust," the rabbi said.

"We have names of those children, and we're going to use them as our focus. It's important to give kids focus."

The Learnathon will also feature guest educators. Rabbi Shmuel Klein, the director of publications and the head of the Holocaust studies program at Torah Umesorah, an organization that promotes Torah-based education, will be coming from New York to address the students.

"He used to be one of the principals here at Eitz Chaim and a teacher... When he was here, he was very instrumental in developing our whole Holocaust programming," he said.

"We hope he'll charge up the crowd in educating the kids."

Grant helps expand special needs program

Cara Stern
Staff Reporter

For Robin Quint, Camp Ramah's Tikvah program for teens and young adults with special needs is a huge help.

When her 23-year-old daughter, Terri, is away at Ramah, Quint can rest easy knowing that not only is she making friends and enjoying summer camp activities, she's also gaining skills to help her in her life outside camp.

"Letters are written and I can see someone has helped her. She can read and understand what I've written," Quint said. "There's also an emphasis on her showering herself and lots of other life skills."

This year, thanks to a \$50,000 grant to the Ramah network of camps from the Ruderman Family Foundation – \$10,000 of which went to the Canadian camp – Ramah was able to expand the Tikvah program, employing a dedicated head of its vocational program.

The Utterson, Ont., camp brought Tikvah participants to the nearby town of Bracebridge, where they could volunteer with seniors at a retirement home and at a local YMCA.

At the camp, they worked in the laundry facility and guest housing, giving them an opportunity to develop skills they can use outside camp.

The heads of the Tikvah program, Casey

and Adam Green, work with the vocational education participants to identify strengths and interests, so that they can tailor a program to each camper's needs.

Casey Green said one of the biggest benefits for participants is the socialization experience, giving them an opportunity to experience life outside the sheltered camp community.

"If you're helping out a camp and everyone knows you, it's different from volunteering and having to understand social nuances," she said, explaining that

at camp, it might be acceptable for the participants to be late for their volunteering jobs, but people might be less forgiving out in the wider community.

Terri Quint, who's been going to Ramah since she was a teenager, said she loves camp as a whole, but her favourite part of the Tikvah program is the work component. One of the skills she learned this year is how to do laundry.

Although Robin Quint said it's hard to pinpoint what others skills her daughter picked up at camp versus at the other programs for young adults with special needs that she attends regularly, she said she's noticed a change.

"She's done unbelievably well with the help from Ramah, without a question," she said. "I can only highly recommend that camp in the strongest possible way."



Terri Quint

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