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Empowering teens Jewish Youth Philanthropy Institute founder stepping down to focus on national programs

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by Eric Fingerhut

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Barbara Gervis Lubran says it drives her nuts "when people say teens are the leaders of tomorrow."

"They're the leaders of today" and should be treated like serious decision makers, says the founder of the Jewish Youth Philanthropy Institute, who is leaving her post as the group's chair this spring.

The young people who have worked with her say she does exactly that.

"She gave us the power to design the program," said Julia Vogl, 21, part of the first group of JYPI participants and now a senior at Oberlin College in Ohio. "She gave us the power to make decisions and let us guide the way."

The first teen member of JYPI's board, Vogl added that "not many people have given me that much power."

Ian Eppler, a 16-year-old sophomore at Georgetown Day School in the District who is part of the initial "JYPI 201" advanced group for teens who are going through the program for the second time, concurs. "She treats us like adults [and] gives us a lot of responsibility," he said.

"I think teens get a bad rap," Lubran, 53, said in an interview last week. "I am convinced that teens want to do something meaningful with their lives," and they "not only step up to the plate, but hit home runs when we provide them with serious opportunities to do so."

JYPI gives eighth- through 12th-graders the opportunity to make an impact as budding philanthropists. Their donations of \$250 or \$500 (the older kids, farther removed from their bar or bat mitzvah gifts, are required to give less) are matched by the organization. Organized into groups of up to 25 teens, they then pool those resources and act as a mini-foundation, reviewing grant applications, doing on-site visits and making funding decisions as a group.

The group has a service-learning component as well, including week-long summer camps where teens engage in hands-on community service locally and a summer trip to rural Central America to work and learn about the issues that population faces. The service work is followed by discussions about their experiences in a Jewish context.

Lubran said her intention was "never to add another nonprofit to the Jewish world," but it worked out that way.

The Gaithersburg resident came up with the idea for JYPI almost 10 years ago after her two eldest children became b'nai mitzvah. They each had decided to give gift money to tzedakah, but counted on their mom to do all the research.

"I ... realized that this was something they would engage in if they were able to do it in a fun manner," she recalled.

Lubran already had experience with grant programs, having run, a number of years earlier, a Department of Health and Human Services demonstration program to provide services to homeless people with substance abuse. She has long had an affection for teens, working with the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization in a variety of ways - from chairing its D.C. Council board of directors to helping revitalize its special needs chapter to developing a new chapter at a local synagogue - and spending six months as a student teacher in secondary school after graduating college.

When she saw an article in Washington Jewish Week about youth philanthropy endowment funds, she was intrigued. So she approached the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, offering to put in \$5,000 if the endowment fund would match it. After two years as a pilot program under the auspices of the federation, JYPI spun off on its own in 2002.

Lubran emphasizes that JYPI is "not just about families of teens with oodles of resources" and that scholarships are available for all of its programs. She said that while some may view the organization as a way to create future Jewish federation leaders, that has never been a priority for her.

"The goal is to enrich the current lives of these teens," as well as "their future lives and the Jewish community and the world," she said. "They may never do anything organizationally, [but] ... it may inform their own family decisions. ... We give teens the skills to use in a variety of nonprofit and communal settings [and] I hope that we also have them feel it is fun and meaningful."

Vogl noted that the knowledge she gained from JYPI enabled her to advise her brother on the best way to create a board of directors when he was starting his own nonprofit group.

Setting up an organization that provides teens with that kind of information is an example of how Lubran is "constantly thinking outside the box," said JYPI executive director Rebecca Weisman.

Lubran credits that to the fact that "I don't believe in boxes."

"I don't cook well, I don't garden well, I'm not an artist," she said. "This is my creative process. It is extremely creative to build programs," emphasizing that she wants to be "hands-on" in everything in which she gets involved.

She hopes to help build even more such programs as chair of the year-old national Jewish Teen Funders Network, a Jewish Funders Network initiative that is doling out grants and providing technical assistance to assist youth philanthropy programs across the country. About 50 youth philanthropy programs exist in the Jewish community nationally, although JYPI is the only one that exists as a separate nonprofit group.

While working on a national basis, she has no plans to leave JYPI behind. "Organizations need leadership changes," she said, but she still plans on having an active role within JYPI, remaining involved as a facilitator for the teen groups.

The New Orleans native, who has a family philanthropic foundation, also has been frequently traveling down South to help rebuild the Jewish and wider community in her old home city.

She also doesn't leave the service learning to the teens: She spent September volunteering in an orphanage in Peru.

When people asked why, she gave them a simple answer, one that she says is also the real reason why she founded JYPI.

"Simply because I can," she said. "I can make a difference."

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