

Out of the Forest, Into the World

June 22, 2011 - [Deborah Hirsch, Staff Writer](#)

While many of Max Gering's friends this week headed off to the Poconos and beyond to make up bunk beds next to old friends, the soon-to-be senior at Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy flew to Ghana with a group of 15 strangers.

Before leaving the country on Tuesday, Gering, 16, admitted that he was a little nervous about the living conditions he would encounter during his American Jewish World Service mission. But, he said, even seven weeks without access to Internet or modern showers should be well worth the experience ahead. Just being there and understanding a different culture will help him realize that "I don't live in a bubble," he said.

As summer begins, there are thousands of kids still destined for traditional and not-so-traditional camps. But many teenagers have their compasses aimed at more exotic locales. From global service missions to adventure travel programs to overnight camps with far-away excursions, these jet-setters have far more opportunities to see the world than their parents ever did.

"It's the perfect time to do it because we don't have the other factors of life like a job," said Gering.

Flying to another continent doesn't faze the Elkins Park teen at all. He's visited family in South Africa before and last summer opted to forgo a Jewish overnight camp in favor of a three-week service-learning trip to Costa Rica through Global Leadership Adventures.

His 18-year-old brother, Jake, went on the same AJWS program in another village in Ghana last year. This year, the students will be tasked with building a community center and teaching English at a grade school.

Seeking to Serve

AJWS first began sending high schoolers on weeklong service-learning trips in 2003, in response to requests from parents. After two years, the trips were expanded to the "Volunteer Summer" program, which now includes three college and one high school project in different countries.



Last summer, Jake Gering of Elkins Park traveled to Ghana to help villagers build a public latrine. His brother, Max, has just left on a similar Jewish service mission.

Photo by Morgan Soloski

The trip is just the first part of the program. Back home, the participants keep up their activism through newsletters, service opportunities and two retreats in Washington, D.C. There's a very structured curriculum involved.



Max Gering

"It's not just go out and volunteer and hang out," said Samantha Wolthuis, AJWS director of service.

Aside from increasingly fierce competition to get into college, which may drive students to seek community service experiences that will look good on their resumes, Wolthuis said she's found this generation to be truly interested in effecting global change.

They could travel with any number of programs, she said, but "they don't want to sit back, they want to do. They feel like they're empowered and have the confidence to do something."

For Jake Gering, the most incredible part of his experience last year was getting the Ghana villagers involved and invested in their efforts to improve sanitation.

Instead of just building a latrine, he said, they spoke to schoolchildren about how handwashing could prevent the spread of disease and they enlisted local experts to work with them so that "it was their project just as much as it was ours."

With no Internet or phones to distract them, "it was like Shabbat sort of all the time," Gering recalled, speaking by phone from Camp Ramah in the Poconos, where he has returned as a junior counselor after his year off. "I learned a lot about what I care about."

It's one thing to know that 2 billion people in the world live on \$2 a day or less, Gering continued, but when you experience extreme poverty firsthand and really understand how it affects peoples' lives and health, "there's an obligation that you can make a difference."

With more public and private schools incorporating or even requiring community service, it's only natural that summer programs have followed suit, said Howard Batterman, owner and director of Diamond Ridge day camp in Bucks County and Sesame/Rockwood camps and teen travel program in Montgomery County. Even his counselors-in-training take part in about six volunteer projects throughout the summer, up from one or two in past years, he said.

"It's like having another Bar and Bat Mitzvah camp," Batterman said. "A lot of people can teach swimming and sports but you really want to teach kids to grow."

Growing interest in community service also served as an impetus for founding the 92nd Street Y's Havaya International program four years ago, said Marty Maskowitz, the director of Jewish Life at the Manhattan institution.

The four-week travel program brings together 18 teens from the United States and 18 from Israel to tour their respective countries while also volunteering for a variety of projects, from running a day camp for disadvantaged kids in Georgia to dressing up as clowns to cheer up young patients at a Tel Aviv hospital.

Jewish EXPONENT

Unlike a traditional overnight camp summer experience in Israel, where campers might spend time with host families but largely tour alongside fellow Americans, participants from both countries share the entire Havaya experience.

Community service is the vehicle, Maskowitz said, but the overarching goal is to develop lasting connections to Judaism and Israel by showing teens that Jews are part of something larger than their local Jewish communities.

"We used to talk about our Jewish brethren" in Israel, he said. Now, for many young people, "we would be talking about distant cousins."

Eighteen-year-old Naava Feingold, of Wynnewood, was looking for something to do last summer "rather than sit on a couch or be bored working," when she found Havaya through a Google search.

Even though Feingold had already been to Israel three times, she said Havaya was the first time she actually experienced the culture with Israelis. She still keeps in touch with her tripmates through email and Facebook groups. Sometimes, she said, she talks to them more than her friends at school.

"You'd think we wouldn't have been as close but we were so close," Feingold said. "We can go to each other with any problems."

Jessica Beaver, a senior at Central High, will squeeze in only a couple of weeks at home before departing for the first of two traveling programs.



Jessica Beaver

"A lot of people say you're crazy, you'll have no summer, you'll have no down time," Beaver said. But, she continued, not many 17-year-olds get to experience what's she's lined up.

At the start of July, she'll take part in Operation Understanding, a 26-year-old program that brings together eight African-American and eight Jewish teens from the Philadelphia area on a bus tour of Crown Heights, N.Y., the deep South and Washington, D.C.

A few days after returning from that, she'll be off to Israel on Mifgash, a teen advocacy trip developed as part of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia's Partnership 2000 program with sister city Netivot Sedot Negev. Over the 14-day trip, the Philadelphia teens will meet with Israelis, sightsee and volunteer. After returning home, they'll be required to come up with an Israel awareness program at their respective synagogues.

If there was a downside to such a jam-packed summer, Beaver said, it would be missing out on the city-run theater day camp she's attended for years. Some of her closest friends still go there.

Rebecca Newman will be off to Israel, too, in her case with 130 other teens from seven Habonim Dror camps across North America. Though Newman has been to Israel before, she said she wouldn't miss the chance to see what the Labor Zionist Youth movement leaders have in store for them.

"It's like another side of Israel," explained the 16-year-old rising junior at Abington Senior High School.

Jewish EXPONENT

While Jewish overnight camps have taken older campers on Israel trips for decades, Ramah in the Poconos also has a domestic excursion for 10th graders.

Instead of the usual summer retreat trip to Washington, D.C., the group this year will fly to Denver for horseback riding, hiking, biking and other activities at Ramah Outdoor Adventure. The "outward bound" style program was one of five speciality camps that opened around the country last summer through a Foundation for Jewish Camp "incubator" funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation. The idea was to draw kids to a Jewish setting who might have looked to similar secular camps instead.

Ilana McAfoos said she's excited for the chance to bond over hiking trails, but five days away from camp is enough for her. The Cheltenham high schooler has been spending summers at Ramah since she was 5, in childcare while her dad, a teacher, led nature programs, and her mom, a principal, ran the canteen.

"I want to travel but I think at this point in my life camp is really the most important part to me because I only have two more years left as a camper," McAfoos explained. "So many things happen during the summer that for me, it's hard to imagine leaving."