



Volunteers pose behind the pins after a week of renovating the youth center at the Latino Mission Society. From left to right: Josh Kanter, Eli Newman, Elana Graf, Rachael Malerman, Hayley Sakwa, Laura Katsnelson, Juanita Martinez, Shira Moskowitz, Bradley Snider, Marc Rivera, Ben Falik.

A New Partnership

U-M Hillel's Alternative Spring Break in the city becomes the Jewish Detroit Initiative.

Bradley Snider

Special to the Jewish News

This spring, a new *chavurah* (fellowship) emerged between University of Michigan Hillel and Detroit communities. This new collaboration, the Jewish Detroit Initiative, leverages U-M's proximity to Detroit to enhance student involvement through engagement, education and action.

For years, Hillel has been running Alternative Spring Break (ASB) service-learning trips across the U.S. and abroad. With Detroit just 40 minutes away, students now have the opportunity to engage in Detroit beyond their weeklong immersion. Relationships can be sustained throughout the year with addi-

tional trips to Detroit and online efforts.

The impetus for JDI came from Tilly Shames, executive director of U-M Hillel, and fellow Jewish Funds for Justice (JFSJ) Detroit leadership cohort members Ben Falik of Repair the World and Amit Weitzer, a JFSJ educator.

As a resident in the Summer in the City house in Detroit and a U-M alum with three U-M Hillel ASB trips under my belt, I had the opportunity to lead this project as UM-Hillel Detroit Program Associate.

Next came creating meaningful service and activities for a group of motivated U-M students and Detroit community members. Last summer, I was helping Pastor Gregory Lorenz of the Latino Mission Society (LMS), a Summer in

the City partner, move a foosball table into the church's basement. When he opened the doors, I was amazed to see a 1924 bowling alley that looked like it had been frozen in time — and dust.

He shared his dream of restoring it as a safe, productive space for local teens. I shared our desire to connect U-M students with Detroit youth through service. Renovating and re-imagining the bowling alley was the major focus of our ASB experience and an incredible opportunity to empower a group of young neighborhood volunteers.

In the mornings, Hillel volunteers tutored students at nearby Amelia Earhart Elementary Middle School.

Through the leadership of students Rachael Malerman and Hayley Sakwa,

the JDI is now a yearlong vibrant U-M Hillel group seeking to engage more students. The group has created an online forum for students to discuss their relationships with the city. Plans also call for more opportunities for students to experience Detroit and to host educational discussions between the U-M Hillel and Detroit communities.

JDI received grants from the Himmel Foundation and Hillel/Repair Campus Network. New funding is being sought.

Also, JDI would like to expand to other campuses; all are welcome to join this new journey. To become involved in the JDI, go to umichjdi.tumblr.com or send an email to detroit.initiative@gmail.com.

Here are tales from the Detroit week:

“On Wednesday, Julia and Marisol, founders of the Boggs Education Center, told us about their plan to help address some of the issues we had seen throughout our time volunteering in the classroom. They are in the process of creating a charter school that will focus on including the community in education, experiential learning, place-based learning and sustainability.”

“Personally, I was fascinated by their innovation. I love the idea of taking an old structure that no longer fits society's needs and remodeling it. They really inspired me to make changes in existing systems that I no longer think are functional. Society should no longer accept a structure just because it has been there for decades.”

— Shira Moskowitz ('15), Huntington, NY

“Friday was party time! Quickly, before Team Earhart arrived, we finished the final touches on the bowling alley and set up all the treats for the party: ice cream, cookies, chips and salsa, candy and soda.”

“One amazing story, which was one of my favorite parts of the trip, happened today. One middle-schooler revealed to us that after school he had been with 40 other students on the way to a fight. He decided to break off from the group and come hang out with

everyone at Latino Mission Society instead. I think this helped our group realize how powerful this center can be for these kids.”

“Overall, everyone had a great time at the party. People bowled, played air hockey, foosball and ping pong. There was even some dancing to Katy Perry! We all had a great time celebrating the work we had done together.”

— Elana Graf ('15), Minnetonka, Minn.

“What a great way to end our week! Saturday in Southwest Detroit was an exciting and eventful day. From 10 a.m. - 5 p.m., members of JDI volunteered at the Clark Park Coalition’s Winter Carnival in Clark Park. The carnival included ice skating, horse-drawn carriage rides, a petting zoo, hot chocolate, marshmallow roasting, arts and crafts, face painting and many other fun activities for Southwest Detroit residents and children. Our very own Josh Kanter even dressed up as a Detroit-themed clown to add to the fun carnival atmosphere.

“During the week, we had all advertised the event to our classrooms and to the middle-schoolers at Amelia Earhart Elementary/Middle School, and we were all thrilled to see some of our students show up. Being able to build upon the

connections we had made with the students during the previous week was one of my favorite parts of the day.

“One of the students I had been working with in Mr. Gardner’s fourth-grade classroom was among the Southwest Detroit residents to attend the carnival. I had worked with him every day and to be able to see the smile on his face as he made his way to the ice rink to skate for the first time was a great feeling. It was nice to see all of them come out to support their community and hang out with all of us before we would head back to Ann Arbor the next day. It was also nice to meet all of their families and siblings, who many of us had heard so much about during the week.”

– Rachael Malerman ('13), West Bloomfield



Hayley Sakwa and Rachael Malerman served as student leaders of the Jewish Detroit Initiative, the driving forces behind turning this ASB experience into a yearlong, sustained and vibrant U-M Hillel group.



Josh Kanter, a second-year MSW student in U-M’s Jewish Communal Leadership Program, poses with a student in his Detroit-themed clown costume at the Winter Carnival at Clark Park in Southwest Detroit.

“We were packed and ready to leave for Ann Arbor as we came together for our last meeting over breakfast on Sunday morning. As we shared our individual perceptions of the trip, it was unanimous that it had been a draining week — in the best way.

“In our last conversation, we spoke about sustaining the relationships we have created. It’s easy to drop in and parachute into a community and then leave, but that’s not the vision of JDI. For now we’re sending cards and videos to our elementary students. We’re planning to go back to LMS to bowl and continue getting to know our middle-school friends. At the same time, we know that the spaces we created are in good hands.

“We also need to take our experiences back to our communities in Ann Arbor. Through JDI, I was allowed the opportunity to work alongside and learn with such an amazing group of undergraduate students from U-M Hillel as well as local youth from Southwest Detroit.

“This week reminded me that there is much hope for the future of the Jewish community to consciously educate and engage with diverse communities and social issues that, at times, seem to be so distanced from the lives we lead.”

– Josh Kanter (MSW '12), Huntington Woods

“You may be surprised by all of the innovative thinking that’s coming out of Detroit right now. One example takes the form of a unique Detroit pastime simply known as “Fowling.” Fowling (pronounced like “foe”) is the seemingly odd fusion of bowling and football in a horseshoes-style layout. It became a highlight of our trip.

“Sunday night, we arrived at the colorful old Toy Warehouse on Van Dyke Street to a unique arena of bowling pins set on the floor about 20 feet opposite one another.

“There, we divided into teams of two, taking turns throwing the ole pigskin, attempting our best Stafford impression as we aimed for our opponents’ pins alongside other families that had also come for the fun.

“Admittedly, I’m not the best arm. The ball bounced around lots, and sometimes it took numerous attempts to score, but it was worth the satisfaction of hearing the familiar sound of pins crashing. Though some lost and some won, we all had a blast and were grateful that Detroit is home to such originality.”

– Eli Newman ('13), West Bloomfield

“On Tuesday afternoon, I mostly spent time painting with two eighth-grade girls from Earhart, trading music artists and learning about their college plans. I really enjoyed bonding over a fun and meaningful project. I think this is the way dialogue flows most naturally and relationships are formed.

“They also talked to me a bit about the presence of gangs in the Southwest area, first commenting that my Jewish star necklace is the symbol of one such gang. It surprised and frustrated me that many of these young kids have an understanding of or a connection (through older siblings and such) to gangs. I am beginning to realize, however, that this is simply their reality and their environment.

“Rather than expecting these realities to disappear, more tangible goals for community improvement are to provide positive role models, encourage other priorities and create safe spaces in which kids can make good decisions.

“It is also important to embrace the assets of community, such as the family values and community unity so visible in Southwest Detroit, rather than only focusing on its struggles.”

– Hayley Sakwa ('14), West Bloomfield

“Thursday afternoon, we met at Earthworks Urban Farm to tour the facilities and learn how the organization operates. Their mission — ‘to build a just, beautiful food system through education, inspiration and community development’ — expresses not just their purpose, but also their actions.

“The farm is located on a couple blocks of Meldrum Street, in a residential neighborhood, and exists as a way to supplement a Capuchin Soup Kitchen with fresh fruits and vegetables and also to provide seedlings to gardeners across the city.

“Earthworks, as a policy, does not

use fences. They seek to engage with the community by keeping a Unity Garden open to any individual with a desire to plant and grow seeds — meaning that many homeless people in the area have 4-foot by 4-foot plots of land they can call their own.

“They also use donations and profits from any produce they sell toward the youth agriculture program in the neighborhood. It was inspiring for me to realize that while food can bring people together, growing food can instill a sense of community.”

– Laura Katsnelson ('14), West Bloomfield

The Detroit Connection

Those at the Jewish Detroit Initiative are interested in your feedback about Detroit and the Jewish community’s role in the city’s past, present and future. Take a moment with your friends and family to consider these questions:

- Why is Detroit different than all other cities?
- What’s one experience or memory you have of Detroit?
- Why are there so many varied perceptions of the city today?
- Do we have a responsibility to the city? Why or why not?

To post your answers and read more about the JDI on its blog, go to umichjdi.tumblr.com.