

Teenagers of different religions learn about Judaism and tolerance

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Anti-Semitism has forever existed in society, since before Michelangelo's famous depiction of Moses with horns. However, Jewish teens in St. Louis are trying to combat common misconceptions of Jews, including ones about their appearance, practice, and general faith, by speaking teenager-to-teenager.

According to the Jewish Community Relations Council of St. Louis' website, its "Student-to-Student" program aims to impart information, foster understanding and counter stereotypes by having Jewish students educate non-Jewish students about Judaism. Each 11th- or 12th-grade participant must go through training before making presentations about Judaism and anti-Semitism to non-Jewish teens.

Nerinx Hall High School theology teacher Patrick Panozzo took his class to Congregation Shaare Emeth. According to Panozzo, he and his students had the opportunity to observe a Torah scroll, hear from a Holocaust survivor, ask a rabbi questions and speak with JCRC students.

"I think hearing peers explain their faith is very impressive to them," Panozzo said. "The biggest opinion change, other than just becoming more positive, is probably surprise at how diverse Judaism is and how many different opinions and practices are acceptable through the different branches."

Panozzo believes that it is important to educate groups about different cultures, and in particular Judaism, because of the Catholic Church's Jewish origins. He also believes that a critical part of understanding others is learning about Judaism, because, according to the Second Vatican Council, there is a call to talk with people of different religions in order to create peace.

"My favorite part was in general just learning about Judaism, a lot about how the faith is different from Catholic faith, since I'm Catholic," said Nerinx sophomore Grace Lepper, one of Panozzo's students. "We were learning from students that live the Jewish faith and every day they go through the motions. It was nice to hear from all of them."

Grace said she was not worried about what she would see before visiting the temple. Instead, she had questions about the details of Judaism, which she said were answered by the time she left Shaare Emeth. Panozzo believes that many of students were not afraid to visit the temple.



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The Cultural Leadership Class 11 poses with Rabbi Andrea Goldstein at Congregation Shaare Emeth during their first retreat.

“Many of the students to whom our participants present have never met a Jewish person,” said Fawn Chapel, coordinator of Student-to-Student. “They may have preconceived ideas about Jews or may not have really given it much thought. By the end of the presentations, they see that Jewish teens are a lot like they are and they have an understanding of what it’s like to be Jewish.”

According to Chapel, topics discussed by the Jewish teenagers are the Jewish lifecycle, kashrut and Israel. They also discuss the relationship with the Torah, Hebrew and Jewish holidays. As well as understanding the basic concepts of Judaism, non-Jewish students leave with an appreciation for the Jewish plight during and after the Holocaust, because many JCRC students relate stories they have heard from relatives or others who were survivors.

“It’s always positive,” Panozzo said. “Before visiting, most have not shaped much of a point of view simply from lack of exposure or experience, but they return from the trip with respect for the faith of Jews and for Jewish people, particularly given [the] history.”

In addition to the non-Jewish students learning about Judaism, the student presenters also gather new lessons. According to Chapel, the participants discover how to discuss their lives because the students may have never had to before. They also understand how similar they are to other high school students with different beliefs.

“Since students are listening to their peers, they are much more engaged than if an adult was presenting to them,” Chapel said. “They feel comfortable asking questions. Participants make the presentations interesting and lively. Teachers tell us that for days after a Student-to-Student visit, their students talk about what they’ve learned and tell them how much they enjoyed the presentation.”

A different group of teenagers comprise a program called Cultural Leadership, which brings African American and Jewish high school students together to become change agents for social justice. This year-long program for 10th and 11th graders consists of monthly meetings for one year, three weekend-long retreats, and a three-week journey across America to see sites of historical significance to Jews and African Americans and meet with activists and leaders. Each year, between 24 and 30 students are selected to take part in Cultural Leadership.

“Our mission is to create a more just and equitable community by educating middle and high school students to recognize and resolve issues of privilege and injustice through the lens of the African American and Jewish experience,” said Cultural Leadership’s Executive Director Holly Ingraham. “We equip students and their parents with the tools and skills necessary to become change agents and advocates for diversity, inclusion and social justice in their communities, workplaces, and schools.”

According to Ingraham, now more than ever, young leaders are needed to effect change to overcome cultural hatred. Participants in Camp Cultural Leadership, a three-week summer camp for rising 7th through rising 10th graders that teaches about social justice ideas and leadership skills, gain a personal connection to the Jewish community.

“Cultural Leadership brings in guest speakers who are Jewish one every couple of months,” said Max Baker, a Ladue Horton Watkins High School sophomore currently in Cultural Leadership. “They educate

people about the history of Judaism and what the Jewish culture consists of. For example [another Cultural Leadership student] brought hamantaschen as a snack and gave a little presentation about what a hamantaschen was.”

Lessons are taught at monthly meetings that last for six hours. The goal of the retreats is to create productive conversations about issues including genderism, sexism and racism.

“During our year-long high school program students experience Jewish culture through our holiday swap and by attending Shabbat services throughout the year at Reform, Conservative and Orthodox shuls in St. Louis, New York City and Mississippi, where they spend two nights at Jacobs Camp,” Ingraham said. “During Cultural Leadership’s holiday swap, non-Jewish students attend a Passover Seder at a Jewish student’s home. Our Jewish students attend Palm or Easter Sunday services with an African-American Christian student.”

As a part of the three-week long journey across America, the students visit the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance, Crown Heights and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City. While they are in Philadelphia, they will see the National American Jewish History Museum and in Washington D.C., students will gain knowledge from visiting the U.S. Holocaust Museum and the Israeli Embassy.

“Cultural Leadership’s mission is to, as they say, create ‘troublemakers of the best kind,’” Max said. “It means to create social justice activists and right now we are learning about all of the histories. They are hoping that when we are done with the program, we will become leaders in the community and learn and educate others.”

Max thinks that educating others about Judaism is exciting and he is proud because the people in the program are interested in learning about other cultures. He can explain Judaism to peers who listen and do not disagree with Judaism.

“I’m around a lot of Jewish kids during this program, so just being around all of these kids has just brought me closer to the Jewish community,” Max said. “We get to learn about Jewish culture that I didn’t even know when they bring in these speakers.”

According to Cultural Leadership student and St. Joseph’s Academy junior Zoe Robinson, the program has changed misconceptions about Jews by showing that Jewish people come from all walks of life.

“I’ve only visited a Reform congregation for Shabbat outside of the program twice and every time the rabbis make sure that we focus on people besides ourselves,” Zoe said. “I was invited over for Rosh Hashana to one of the Jewish student’s house and I was able to learn about this holiday. I had a lot of fun and enjoyed the many traditions they had.”

According to Zoe, she was excited to be selected to be in Cultural Leadership because her family had always had good relationships with Jewish people. She said the Jewish community supported her grandfather’s store after insurance companies refused to pay people’s claims if they went to his store because he was African American. Regardless of her positive views, before Cultural Leadership, she had not yet met a Jewish person. She has greatly enjoyed the experience thus far, and has obtained an even deeper appreciation for diversity.

“It’s important to learn about other people’s cultures because the world is made up of different types of people and to a global citizen, we need to know about people other than us,” Zoe said.