



Hillel

University of Arizona Hillel students at the UJC G.A. prepare a meal at the Los Angeles Midnight Mission as part of the 1000-person JUST for a Day social justice program.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

For Hillel, G.A. is time to show new ways of reaching students
By Jacob Berkman

LOS ANGELES, Nov. 13 (JTA) — While most other heads of major Jewish organizations were downtown at the Los Angeles Convention Center, hobnobbing in suits before the opening plenary of the North American federation system’s annual gathering, the president of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life was in jeans and a T-shirt, very much on the other side of the tracks.

Wayne Firestone spent much of Sunday afternoon with Jewish college students dispersed around the city, engaged in various social action projects as part of Hillel’s “Just for a Day” program.

The event drew some 1,000 students — roughly 700 from colleges in

the Southern California-Arizona corridor and 300 who were delegates to the United Jewish Communities' General Assembly from Hillel outposts across North America.

The students spent the afternoon working at one of six social service agencies including the Midnight Mission, where they cooked food for the homeless; Heal the Bay, where they cleaned up a beach in Santa Monica; and Project Angel Food, where they delivered food to homebound AIDS patients.

After a discussion and debriefing in the evening, the students attended a private concert by pop bands Guster and the LeeVeEs.

As his peers were getting ready for the G.A.'s inaugural event, Firestone — who took over as Hillel president in September after a year as the organization's executive vice president — was overseeing what his organization sees as the first step in a strategic overhaul.

Two years in the making, Hillel issued a plan last May to double the 120,000 Jewish students that have "meaningful experiences" through the organization's 500-plus outposts each year, and to double its roughly \$70 million budget.

The basis of the plan is changing the image that "Hillel is not as welcoming as it should be. It's viewed as a place for the already seriously affiliated," Firestone told JTA at the Los Angeles Food Bank in L.A.'s warehouse district.

Roughly 150 students were repackaging unsalable foodstuffs at the food bank, to be distributed to homeless shelters and soup kitchens throughout L.A. County.

Hillel's plan seems to draw on the successes of grass-roots organizations such as the American Jewish World Service, which draw in young people by giving them social-service opportunities through a Jewish lens.

And it plays on the findings of studies such as Reboot's "OMG: How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era," which show that young people prefer to relate to their religion through cultural experiences.

Firestone also said Hillel must reach students where they are — most often, dispersed among non-Jewish students — so it wants campus

chapters to engage in cross-cultural dialogues, as Heeb Magazine and Jewish music producer J-Dub do when they hold social events.

Hillel employed J-Dub to coordinate Sunday night's concert at The Henry Fonda Theater in Hollywood, JDub President and CEO Aaron Bisman told JTA at the food bank, where the band Guster showed up to help students with their volunteer work.

The perception that Hillel mainly reaches students who already are affiliated is accurate, said Len Saxe, director of the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, which recently wrote a case study on Hillel.

Typically, Saxe told JTA, when Hillel centers open they include kosher dining halls. Those halls attract students who keep kosher — primarily Orthodox students — and by default become the meeting place for the more religiously observant segments among Jews on campus.

Changing that perception will be difficult, Saxe said. Hillel will have to give individual campuses more autonomy in figuring out how to attract students.

Firestone said Hillel is trying to find new and different entry points into Jewish involvement. The organization has charged staffers with providing more meaningful content.

"Getting 150 students to a Shabbat dinner does not necessarily mean that Hillel is being successful," he said.

That's why the Hillel chapter at Washington University in St. Louis, for example, is organizing a performance by Israeli world music performer Idan Raichel that is meant to draw a multicultural audience, chapter president Alex Friedman, a Washington U. senior, told JTA.

While fewer young Jews belong to synagogues, 85 percent to 90 percent of Jews go to college, giving campuses a higher concentration of Jews than almost any other institution. That makes them the most effective venue to find Jews and engage them, Firestone said. The trick is finding the proper entry points.

The federation system remains Hillel's main financial sponsor, but it was no accident that Firestone and the student delegates missed the G.A.'s opening sessions Sunday. One reason was so that G.A. delegates would take note that Hillel is trying to engage students in

ways it never has before — and that it will need the community's help to do so.

“This is the opening salvo,” Firestone said.