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General Assembly: Where the Jewish community uploads

Young Jews Gather at the GA

November 11, 2012

During the 2012 General Assembly opening plenary, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, GA scholar-in-residence asked the audience, "Will the next generation take its rightful place in the chain of tradition? Will our children care? Will they shoulder their share of Jewish responsibility?"

Judging by their turnout at this year's GA, the answer is resoundingly yes.

As the premier North American gathering of the Jewish communal world kicked off today in Baltimore, The Jewish Federations of North America welcomed more than 320 college students and 100 high school students into the fold. This year's GA features unprecedented opportunities for the next generation of the Jewish community to get involved.

Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life brought together student leaders for a mini-conference preceding the launch of the GA. Students involved in Hillel met with Federation lay and professional leaders to learn about Jewish Federations and discuss the needs of the future generation.

Wayne Firestone, president and CEO of Hillel International encouraged the students to "validate, listen to and learn from," the participants of the GA. "The Jewish community has a long history of taking on the impossible," he said. "You have a great opportunity to not only learn something, but to give something too. Your voice will not be a small voice, but a motivating and empowering voice to the community."

Among those in attendance at the Hillel event was Uri Cohen, executive director of the Hillel at Queens College. In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, the Queens College Hillel opened its doors to the many commuter students affected, finding them much-needed food, housing and a sense of community. The Hillel has also been working with a nearby shelter housing hundreds of victims from the Rockaways, even providing "Shabbat kits" for the Jews among them.

"A great mark of a strong Jewish community is one that is able to open its arms to others when needed," said Cohen. "Here at the GA, these students get to see the enormity of that community."

Elsewhere at the GA, student journalists attended a unique conference integrated into the GA through World Zionist Organization (WZO)'s Do the Write Thing program. Throughout the GA, 15 college students from across North America will attend workshops

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Students from across North America will attend workshops addressing topics like Israel in the press, Jewish values, media and the Jewish and Israeli establishment and more.

In its kickoff session, David Breakstone, vice chairman of the WZO, examined the historical connection between Zionism and journalism through a study of Theodor Herzl.

"It's important to understand that from its very inception, Zionism wasn't just about creating a safe place, but also about creating an ideal society in Israel," he said. "If you as journalists can bring people back to this original vision, you will all have done your work."

The day finished with a jubilant Taglit-Birthright Israel Bar Mitzvah celebration to celebrate the program's 13th year of bringing young Jews to Israel for free, with the support of Jewish Federations. The trio of Israeli tour guide Stav Lefler, Birthright alumnus Brian Levin and IDF soldier Ella Rorman, introduced the festivities during the opening plenary.

"I sensed appreciation, even gratitude, towards us soldiers," Rorman told the packed room. "It helped me understand that as an Israeli soldier I protect not only citizens of the country, but the entire Jewish community."



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