PROGRAMMING THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

by Martin Melnick

One of the most valuable assets of the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs is its Torch Award Program Library. The Torch Award Program has encouraged the development of over 1000 innovative programs and continues to recognize clubs that develop programs for building community and relationships while supporting the development of leadership teams. With a formal online application and judging process, the gold, silver and bronze winners are recognized at each FJMC international convention where many of the winning programs are displayed at the Program Fair. A searchable library of these programs is available to FJMC clubs which then adopt or adapt them in their own communities. Torch award winners are proud to display their plaques on their synagogue walls and to be recognized by their communities for their outstanding achievements. The FJMC also provides funding to seed selected programs that have broad international impact. Among those that FJMC has funded are:

YELLOW CANDLE PROGRAM to "Remember the Six Million." Since its inception in Congregation Beth Tzedec, Toronto, Canada, and Temple Ner Tamid, Peabody, Massachusetts, four million Yellow Candles have been distributed and lit and the program has become a worldwide remembrance event.

During the WORLD WIDE WRAP, initiated by the Brotherhood of Mishkan Tefilla, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, and held every Super Bowl Sunday, men, women and students come together to do the mitzvah of donning tefillin. Many synagogues follow the minyan with breakfast and additional educational programming. A growing number of synagogues now Skype the wrap with their twin member congregations in South America, Europe and Israel.

The YAD SHEL CHAI program begun by Jacksonville Jewish Center Men's Club, Jacksonville, Florida, presents a beautiful yad, the "hand" used for guiding a Torah reader, to young people who regularly read Torah for their congregations. The personally engraved FJMC yad is presented after the teen's 18th Torah reading.

BUILD A PAIR, developed by Beth El Men's Club, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, invites 5th to 7th graders to create and put on handmade tefillin at their congregation's World Wide Wrap event. Students learn about tefillin, construct tefillin in which they place Hebrew script that they write, insert 'straps', and create 'WRAP' songs to sing during the World Wide Wrap.

While the TORCH AWARD has evolved since its inception in 1952, it continues to provide recognition for innovation as well as to serve as a source of information and inspiration for FJMC's clubs.

WHAT'S HAPPENING FOR YOUNGER MEN

THE LIFE FORCE OF AN organization must be sustained or the organization itself will slowly cease to exist. One important issue is how to attract new blood. With this in mind, the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs has created a TORCH AWARD category entitled Programming for Young Men to respond to this need. A variety of creative ideas were shared during the most recent FJMC biennial convention.

The men's club of B'nai Torah Congregation, Boca Raton, Florida, developed a program to encourage younger men to become more involved in Jewish learning. On an organized hike, a rabbi led a discussion connecting the week's parashah with environmental issues. This activity helped to connect a strictly intellectual experience with both a physical and spiritual awakening.

At Temple Torah, Boynton Beach, Florida, the young cantor offered liquor tasting classes. (Before centennial school, he was a bartender.) The classes, held during the week to not interfere with family weekends, covered the processes of making various liquors and then tasting samples of each.

Two other clubs took advantage of members who had expertise with alcoholic beverages. At Beth Emeth-Beis Yehuda, Downsview, Ontario, an expert craft brewer paired samples of small production beers with food items. At Temple Israel Center, White Plains, New York, another expert connected various styles of ales and lagers to European Jewish history and Jewish contributions to the art of brewing.

The men's club of Beth El Synagogue Center, New Rochelle, New York, partnered with the congregation's Families Initiative Committee for a family campout on the synagogue grounds. The overnight included activities, campfire and sleeping in tents, which became a "camp-in" thanks to the weather.

Another program of the Temple Israel Center men's club was for children and their fathers. A club member discussed his exploits and activities during the Second World War. This led to greater interest in learning about the involvement of Jewish men in World War II and a connection with West Point.

Finally, the men's club of Temple Israel of Natick, Massachusetts, set up a photo booth at the congregation's Purim carnival to reach out to the next generation. This was a way to expand the club's data base while providing a service to its members.

Martin Melnick is Executive Vice President of the Connecticut Valley Region and was Torch Award Chairman at the 2013 FJMC Convention.