

## 'Every day is different'

### Local students talk about volunteering on gap year program in Israel

Abigail Klein Leichman • Local



Charlie Spiegel (in red) and Noah Stein (in blue) with teens at Yemin Orde Youth Village. — DANIELLE MANZOUR

Since January 4, Noah Stein and Adi Haruni of Tenafly and Charlie Spiegel of Paramus have been volunteering in the Yemin Orde Youth Village in the picturesque Carmel mountains near Haifa.

The 19-year-olds chose this option from among several offered to participants in the Young Judaea Year Course, a gap year program that combines classroom studies for college credit, traveling, and volunteering across Israel. "I felt I could have the greatest impact at Yemin Orde," said Noah, who graduated from Tenafly High School in 2014. "I've never had the opportunity to interact with so many people from different cultures and backgrounds: Ethiopian, Russian, and French kids. I thought I could really learn from them, and I could offer them something to learn as well."

Yemin Orde, originally founded to shelter orphaned Holocaust survivors, now houses more than 400 mostly teenage immigrants from France, North Africa, Iran, India, Yemen, Eastern Europe, and South America. Each of them has suffered some sort of trauma. About 20 percent of them are orphans, while the rest have family here or abroad who cannot care for them. Noah volunteers on the village's farm each weekday morning. "There's a wood shop and a greenhouse, and some livestock — mostly goats and chickens," he said. "Every day is different. Sometimes I'm shepherding goats; other days I'm building a roof or potting plants.

"Many of the kids come to the farm and you see a whole new side to them as they connect in different ways other than traditional educational methods," he said. The experience is not only altruistic. "You get to see the products of your work, which I find very gratifying," he added. "I've never worked with power tools before or built anything from scratch, and it's also really nice being outside."

Charlie, who graduated from Paramus High School in 2014, volunteers in the village's school, teaching English to teenagers in small groups or in a class of 15. "Some of them are only a couple of months younger than me, and it was pretty rough at the beginning," he said, recalling that his first assignment was to drill students on the proper use of "was" and "were." "That was a bad lesson, but I gradually got better and better at making the lessons fun and interesting," he said. "Everyone said it would be hard to get through to these kids, but now they like me and I like them. One guy who arrived four months ago from Russia calls me 'achi,' 'my brother,' and that was my best moment, knowing he felt that comfortable with me." Charlie said that the language barrier does not keep him from talking with the teens about whatever is going on in their lives. He uses a combination of English, rudimentary Russian, and Hebrew, hand signs, and pictures — "basically five languages."

He said that one of the reasons he chose Yemin Orde was the location. "It's a very wholesome lifestyle, very meditative, and that gives you a lot of time to think," he said.

Noah agreed. "Yemin Orde is on a mountain, so you have a great view of the Mediterranean and the surrounding villages," he said. "It's really beautiful, and pretty much isolated. "It's nice not having outside distractions and just focusing on what we're doing there," he added.

Out of 150 participants on the Young Judaea Year Course in Israel this year, 11 are from New Jersey. During the current portion of the program, Tali Ron of Fair Lawn, Khassy Kotliar of Teaneck, and Gabe Rubin of Englewood opted to take part in the IDF's Marva "boot camp" experience. Others have joined a first-response team or other volunteer ventures in the coastal city of Bat Yam, where many Year Course participants now use as their home base. Five of the Yemin Orde contingent of 12 departed earlier this week for three weeks of volunteering at Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village in Rwanda, which was modeled after Yemin Orde.

The Year Course participants previously spent a few months in Jerusalem, where one of their classes focused on effective ways to counter anti-Israel activity on college campuses. But just being in Israel has had a profound effect. "I'm so ridiculously pro-Israel now," Noah said, with a laugh. "I feel a deep, deep connection to the places that I've lived here. When people go on 10-day Birthright trips, they don't even know the half of it."

Come fall, Noah will head to Columbia, while Charlie will go to Rutgers. The two friends met as first-graders at the Solomon Schechter Day School of Bergen County, and they have been best buddies since third grade.

"Not many of my friends took a year off before college," says Noah. "I know college will be there waiting for me when I get back. Taking this year getting to know myself, building friendships, exploring Israel, new cultures and a new language, I feel I've learned so much I couldn't get otherwise."