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## THIS WEEK

### Hitting the Road

Atlanta teen travel program goes national

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The Jewish Times

**B**illy Planer is on a mission to integrate what high school students learn in the classroom with real world experiences — all with a Jewish-American spin.

"We do a really good job as Jewish educators about making a strong connection with our spiritual homeland, Israel," Planer said. "I'm working to ensure that students make connection with their physical homeland as well."

So when the 32 teens participating in his Etgar 36 summer travel adventure gather near Marietta's Big Chicken on June 27, fried chicken won't be on the agenda of the first day of their cross-country trip. They will be visiting the site where Leo Frank was hanged in 1915 by vigilantes and discussing the case and its ramifications for Jewish-American identity with Rabbi Steve Lebow of Temple Kol Emeth and Dale Schwartz, who worked

to get Frank a posthumous pardon.

Atlantans are familiar with Planer's dual-identity trips through his 12 years running youth programming for Congregation Ahavath Achim. He left that job at the end of May to devote his time to a variety of youth travel programs, which have grown to include teens and pluralistic Jewish schools from across the country. He has seen his cross-country summer enrollment grow from 12 in 2004 to 32 this year.

Among this summer's group will be six Atlanta teens: Micah Chervin, Nate Sinnerich, Shira Hinds, Daniel Bressler, Keith Wasser and Noah Fixelle, whose sister Hillary was the first participant ever to sign up for an Etgar trip. They will be joined by 26 other high schoolers from 17 cities, including Boston, Chicago, Miami, Charleston, New York, St. Louis and Pittsburgh.

Over 36 days, the group will travel cross-country by bus and airplane, making stops to tour civil-rights sites in the South, to run the bases at Wrigley Field, to discuss the



The Etgar 36 summer travel adventure group last year in Washington, D.C.

war on drugs at a synagogue for former addicts, to listen to the nonstop noise in Las Vegas and the ultimate quiet of the Grand Canyon and to confront history in Dallas, Oklahoma City, New York, Boston and Washington, D.C.

Here's what one teen said on Planer's Web site (etgar.org) of his tour last year:

"At Beit Teshuvah a synagogue for recovering addicts, Rabbi Mark Borovitz

moved us with his talk about how each of us is holy, special and good enough. . . . Most of us agreed that our stop at Beit Teshuvah was one of the best experiences on the trip so far."

That's the kind of response Planer is seeking from trip participants.

"I started doing trips for youth groups,"

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he said, "exploring American cities, teaching Jewish kids about their dual identity as Americans and Jews, adding in political and social activism. They learn about Jewish values in the context of American history and culture."

"The name of my organization, Etgar 36," Planer explained, "embodies that goal. Etgar means challenge [in Hebrew], the challenge to help kids learn to think for themselves in any realm, to make their own decisions. The 36 stands both for the length of the trip, 36 days, and for double *chai*, teaching kids about their double identity as dedicated Jews and Americans."

When Planer was approached to offer school trips, he began to develop an agenda for pluralistic Jewish high schools. Atlanta's Weber School has offered four trips, and Planer says pluralistic Jewish

schools from all over the country have been quick to take advantage of his approach.

Planer credits Simcha Pearl, Weber's head of school, with inspiring him.

"He was one of the first people I ever talked to," Planer said. "He encouraged and supported me from the beginning. He wanted me to take students on the road so they could see that what they learn in the classroom has real world implications. When they were reading Thoreau, we went to Walden Pond."

Next year, with more time to devote to year-round programming, Planer plans to offer confirmation classes and synagogue youth groups the opportunity to take part in his non-denominational setting. He says he can accommodate kashrut requests, and also is planning a separate trip for more traditionally observant students. □