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Teen Travel Program Will Expand / p. 13

Etgar Expands Program

Teen trips to accommodate school start dates, shorter adventures

By FRAN NACHMAN PUTNEY
The Jewish Times

Etgar 36, a year-old Atlanta-based travel program for teens that looks at American history through a Jewish lens during a 36-day road trip across America, is expanding to offer six trips in 2005.

New trips include two 36-day trips with different departure dates for students from the North and South whose school start dates vary widely. Other options include two shorter East and West coast trips, some of which will be conducted with BBYO and accommodate greater Jewish observance.

According to organizer Billy Planer, 37, who also directs informal youth programs at Ahavath Achim Synagogue in Buckhead, Etgar, which means challenge in Hebrew, is offering more options because of "the excitement of people hearing about the trip."

Teens who return from the trip "say they have a deeper concern for what's going on in the world and [can] articulate their thoughts," Planer said. "I see their self confidence. I have no doubt that the future leaders will have been on this trip."

During the 36-day trip, which visits 28 cities, teens debate hot button American issues such as gun control and abortion, as Aaron Backer did on the Etgar trip this summer.

The Riverwood High School junior had embarked thinking his opinions on these issues were already firm. "But listening to right wing people talk, I got to understand how they got to [their] beliefs, and I became more accepting of them and where they are coming from," he said.

He said one of the trip's highlights was a visit to Kent State University in Ohio, where the National Guard killed four student protesters on May 4, 1970, including two Jewish students.

There students heard from Alan Canfora, a survivor of shootings, and said *kaddish* at the university memorial.

Afterwards, when their tour bus broke down near the university, the repair man told the teens over dinner the story of a friend who had been on the hill at Kent State that fateful day serving as a National Guardsman.

"So we heard another side of the story and learned that you have to look at both sides and look [critically] at what the me-

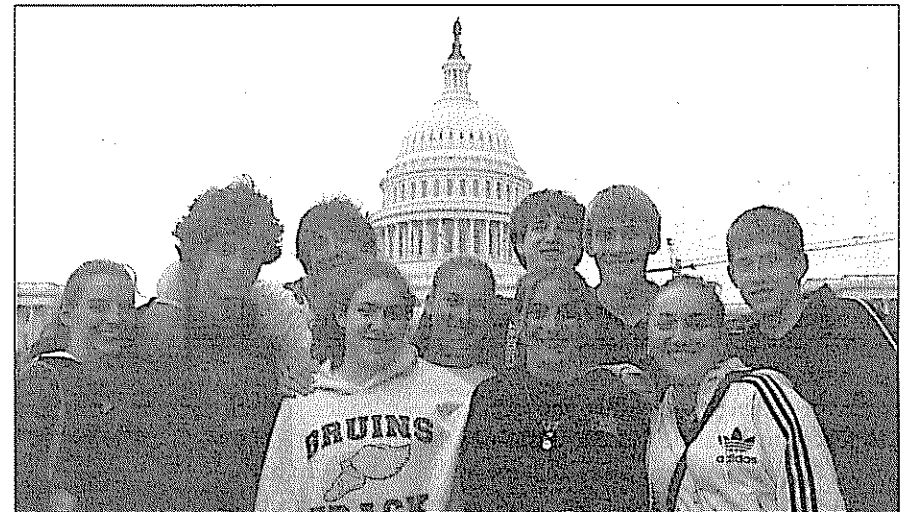


PHOTO COURTESY BILLY PLANER

Teens on this summer's Etgar 36 trip visited Washington, D.C.

dia said," Backer said.

Planer, who has led the Etgar trips, acknowledges that with the organization's growth comes a new focus on staff training and standardization "so every kid will walk away from the trip with the same experience whether I'm on the bus or not," he said.

He will also focus on fundraising to provide scholarships for teens who cannot afford the \$5,000 fee for the 36-day adventure (the shorter trips will be less expensive).

According to experts like Dr. Joseph Reimer, director of the Institute for Informal Jewish Education at Brandeis University, the money is well spent in that

American based trips like Etgar can involve kids Jewishly just as well as a trip to Israel does.

The challenge will be to convince parents and kids that "instead of earning money [during the summer] they should spend it," said Reimer.

"We find the more [involved they are], the more [they become involved]," he said. "When kids get Jewishly interested, one choice leads to the next. The choice seems to be more — to be involved or not to be involved." □

For more information about Etgar 36, visit www.etgar.org.