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THIS WEEK

New Teen Program Will Tour America

AA's Planer motivated by drop in Israel trips

By FRAN M. PUTNEY
The Jewish Times

Wanted: Motivated, open-minded, inquisitive teens willing to spend 36 days traveling across the United States exploring their American and Jewish identities.

If this sounds like a teen-ager you know, Eggar 36, a new independent summer travel program for current 10th through 12th graders, could be the ticket to the ultimate summer educational vacation.

"This is not for the teen-ager who wants a Hard Rock Café tour of America," said Billy Planer, the program's founder and director. "This is for the teen-ager who not only has a desire to see sights, but also understands that learning and discovering and exploring and experiencing can be fun and enriching, not boring."

The cost will be \$4,900 per traveler and Planer says he needs 22 participants to make the trip happen. The next informational meeting will be held Jan. 30 at Congregation B'nai Torah; a \$300 discount will be given to anyone signing up that night.

Planer, who is the director of informal education at Ahavath Achim Synagogue, says the idea for the trip was eight years in the making. During that time, he has taken youth groups to most of the 36 cities to which Eggar (Hebrew for "challenge") will travel.

The Intifada, which has kept many Jewish high school students away from Israel, also motivated Planer, who cites statistics that only one out of eight teenagers who might have gone to Israel is taking an alternative Jewish trip.

The 2003 Eggar 36 itinerary — which begins and ends in Atlanta — is scheduled for June 23 to July 29. Most of the trip will be by bus, except for a flight from San Francisco to Chicago.

The five-and-a-half week journey will take students to at least 20 cities where they will be able to see the sights and hear the

sounds of the places that are relevant to American history, current social and political issues and Jewish values.

For example, in Memphis, Tenn., visits to Graceland, Elvis Presley's mansion, and the Civil Rights Museum, will be the catalyst to discuss how the history of rock 'n' roll ties in with the history of — and the Jewish involvement in — the civil rights movement in that city.

At the Grand Canyon, the teens will tour the park and discuss the preservation movement along with the pros and cons of drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. In San Francisco, the group will visit the first paperback bookstore and discuss the problem of illiteracy in America.

In Dodge City, Kans., the teens will learn about the western expansion and life on the frontier in America and then compare that to the issues and problems of settlements in Israel.

In Washington, the group will visit Sen. Joseph Lieberman's Orthodox synagogue and meet with the Connecticut Democrat.

In every discussion, says Planer, the teens will be asked to think about all sides of the issue. "The true bottom line of the trip is not to tell them what to think, but to get them to think," Planer said. Rachel Silberstein, 25, who traveled with Planer on shorter Eggar trips when she was in high school, says the trip was a terrific experience.

Silberstein, now the office manager for ORT, particularly recalls one trip to Washington and Philadelphia with Planer.

"I remember how he brought Jewish education into politics and government and how the nation was started. We got to relate everything from that into our Jewish world."

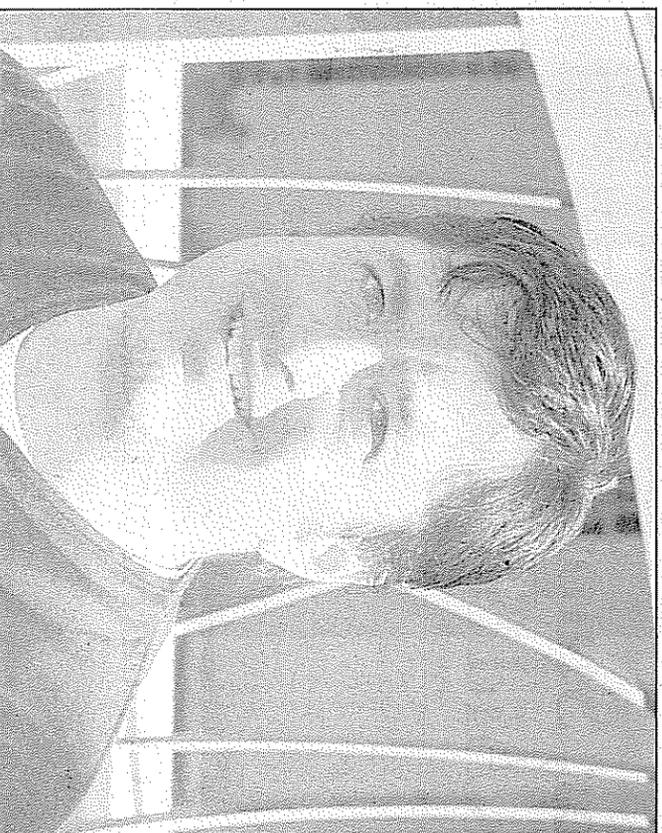


PHOTO BY FRAN M. PUTNEY

Billy Planer created Eggar 36, a summer travel program for 10th through 12th graders. And, Silberstein says, her experiences on Eggar trips have stayed with her: "They'll learn so much," she said of the teens who will participate.

While the students will spend a lot of time immersed in history and social issues, Planer stresses that there will be plenty of free time.

For example, one day has been set aside to hike, swim and explore Zion National Park, where participants will also celebrate Shabbat. The teens also will see a Cirque de Soleil performance in Las Vegas, a Broadway show in New York and a concert of the Blue Man Group in Boston.

Planer thinks the program will shape Jewish identity by helping participants consider: What does it mean to be a Jew in America?

"They're going to develop both identities. They'll see how that overlap," Planer said, adding that the trip is open to any Jewish teen. Marianne Fixelle, whose 16-year old daughter Hillary is signed up for Eggar 36, said that she was interested in the trip because Planer "relates to the kids on such a wonderful level, and we like surrounding our kids with really good role models."

Hillary was excited about the itinerary when she saw how it blended her interests, social studies and politics, with Jewish identity and American history.

Several college students who have experience working with Jewish teens will accompany Planer and Eggar participants, as will a security guard who will be with the group at all times.

The teens will enter their activities daily on the Eggar Web site to keep family and friends up on their trip.

Planer says he will take applications until March. Because this will be the inaugural summer for Eggar 36, Planer says the teens who sign up will be "on the ground floor of what's going to be a tremendous program," and they will have the opportunity to "shape and mold the experience."

Visit www.eggar.org for more information.