

# National

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## Talking Race, Economy, Israel and More in Camp Devoted to Discourse

**A program takes teenagers around the country to hear opposing views on hotly debated issues.**

By **AUDRA D. S. BURCH**

They went to the Heritage Foundation, the conservative think tank in Washington, to learn about income inequality. They went to Birmingham, Ala., where they sang hymns and talked about the civil rights movement. In Salt Lake City, they met a gun lobbyist who discussed the sanctity of the Second Amendment.

Each stop was designed to reveal something about the country and how the students, all between the ages of 14 and 18, form their opinions on the great social and political issues of our time.

Etgar 36 is a summer camp meets road trip, and campers are exposed to opposing arguments about hotly debated issues at a time when many Americans are not used to talking to people with whom they disagree. The arts and crafts, sports and roaring bonfires of traditional sleepaway summer camps have been replaced by cultural journeys and exercises in critical thinking and civic engagement.

For Billy Planer, the camp's founder, arming young people with information and

was shared on the camp's website. "Mr. Woods showed us how to use love and singing to express our emotions in the fight for justice," she wrote.

"It was definitely the most powerful moment in my life," she added.

The roots of Etgar are from Mr. Planer's experiences in the mid-1980s, when he spent summers at traditional Jewish sleepaway camps in western Massachusetts. In high school, he traveled to Israel with a camp, and the concept of learning through experience and travel stuck.

Mr. Planer was working as a youth director at a synagogue in Atlanta before he started Etgar in 2003. About 475 teenagers have participated in the summer camp, which is open to all faiths, although most who participate are Jewish. The name, he said, means "challenge" in Hebrew.

This year's campers came from states including Tennessee, Oklahoma, New York, Georgia and Illinois. Most were able to afford the \$5,000 or \$7,000 fee for the three- and five-week camps; those who could not were aided by private donations or a reduced fee. Many of the campers said they were liberal, and a few said they were libertarians or socialists.

As part of their experience, the campers are encouraged to confront issues rather than people. They are taught to defend their ground while leaving room for different ways of thinking.

After hearing from representatives at J Street, a pro-Israel lobbying group, Max Orston, 15, said he changed his mind about the possibility of a two-state solution.

"Our conversations prompted me to do more research and I ended up leaning toward one-state," Max explained.

Max's father, Todd Orston, said he partly chose Etgar to give his son the opportunity to learn about issues from different perspectives before coming to his own conclusions.

"I wanted my son's eyes to be open and for him to be exposed to real-world issues that people face on a daily basis so he can grow intellectually," said Mr. Orston, a family lawyer in Sandy Spring, Ga., who attended traditional Jewish camps through high school.

In Maryland, the campers gathered in a suburban hotel room to hear the story of Daryl Davis, a blues musician who befriended members of the Ku Klux Klan, including Scott Shepherd, a former Grand Dragon. Mr. Davis described attending Klan rallies and forming friendships with K.K.K. members, some of whom have turned their robes over to him and denounced white supremacy.

The next morning, Jesse, the teenager from Manhattan, stared out a bus window, still thinking about Mr. Davis's talk and the power of forgiveness. "It was eye-opening to think someone in this terrible group can be turned around," she said.

On the ride to the nation's capital toward the end of this year's journey, Matt Levine, a 15-year-old from Scotch Plains, N.J., pored over a newspaper article about debt and the middle class.

He was reading to prepare for a discussion at the Heritage Foundation. There had been other presentations on the tour and Matt said he regretted not following up with a question or two. This time would be different, he said.

At the end of the presentation, he raised his hand and asked about the shrinking middle class. The moment was a personal breakthrough.

"I found my voice!" Matt said as he headed back to the bus.

For Mr. Planer, the purpose of the camp is not about moving someone along the political spectrum, but about teaching young people to listen to arguments and to be better prepared to defend their own.

"Maybe they change their minds" he said. "Maybe they don't."



"I wanted to do this camp so I could see the other side," a liberal camper said.

ideas is the best way to prepare them for the emerging challenges of the world. Perhaps more quickly than ever before, teenagers are pressured to take a side and have an opinion amid an unending sea of status updates on social media.

"Success for us is finding humanity in discussions with people who have opposing views," Mr. Planer, 52, said. "We want our kids to ask questions" and "gut-check their own positions," he said.

On a bus that resembled the rolling digs of a rock band, the campers crisscrossed the country for several summer weeks to hear about women's reproductive rights and gun control, the West Bank and marijuana legalization.

This year, Etgar included stops in 26 cities. The teenagers, carrying cellphones, pillows, backpacks and the occasional stuffed animal, first loaded onto the bus in Atlanta. In addition to nights in hotels, they slept on the bus during long drives, like the stretches from Boulder, Colo., to Salt Lake City or Los Angeles to San Francisco.

The campers entertained themselves with silly inside jokes and played on Snapchat. Between attending presentations on abortion and race, they celebrated birthdays, gossiped about school and munched on Twizzlers. Before their trip to the Heritage Foundation, they visited United for a Fair Economy, a nonpartisan advocacy group in Boston.

"My world is essentially liberal so I wanted to do this camp so I could see the other side," said Jesse Eick, 15, who is from Manhattan and wants to work on political campaigns or become a journalist. "In my normal life, I might not ever interact with people who think differently. That is not a productive perspective — you have to understand the whole picture."

Jim Pfaff, the chief of staff of the Colorado House Republicans, has been speaking to the young people of Etgar for 13 years. Mr. Pfaff opposes gay marriage and said he knew that many of the campers disagreed with his views. But that was not the point.

"A free exchange of ideas is crucial for a free society. One of the things that makes our country great is that people with disparate viewpoints could be friends," said Mr. Pfaff, who hosted this year's conversation in a Colorado Springs park. "That is rapidly changing. From a political perspective, we are seeing people shut down ideas because they don't agree."

In Birmingham, the campers gathered at a park near 16th Street Baptist Church, where four girls were killed by white supremacists in a 1963 bombing. Bishop Calvin Woods Sr. spoke about the importance of music during the civil rights movement, and it was not long before "We Shall Overcome" and "This Little Light of Mine" filled the air.

Rachel Rubins, 17, of Lansdale, Pa., wrote a journal entry about that afternoon that



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Matt Levine, a 15-year-old from Scotch Plains, N.J., said that over the course of the tour he learned the importance of asking follow-up questions. "I found my voice!" he said after a session in Washington.



Ryder Rosenthal, above, took notes during a session with J Street, a pro-Israel lobbying group. Campers with Etgar 36 traveled by bus, above right, to hear speakers like Daryl Davis, right, a musician who befriended members of the Ku Klux Klan and helped influence some to denounce white supremacy.



### Summer in America

Articles in this series explore what summer camps tell us about the country.

Etgar 36 campers met with a representative from Greenpeace on Aug. 1. The program costs \$5,000 or \$7,000, depending on the tour.