

A Friends @ Home Experience

One of the main programs run by the Friendship Circle, Friends @ Home, pairs one or two teen volunteers with a special child so that they can spend quality time once a week just "hanging out" together at the child's home. The following excerpt recounts a visit to a child's home from one of our Friendship Circle coordinators a few months ago (the names have been changed to protect the privacy of our families).

By Rochel Groner

It's a sunny day here in Charlotte, but I'm feeling anything but calm. I'm on the way to observe Adam's second visit, as he is a new volunteer. Adam has agreed to push up the visit so he can still make his basketball game tonight, and Steven's mom (Steven is Adam's special friend) has postponed their trip to the aquarium until later this afternoon. I just got off the phone with Adam to make sure he has the directions straight, as I'd hate for any of the carefully scheduled hour and a half visit to be wasted in a car.

But now that I'm on my way,

I'm thinking, "Is this really helping? Are they just doing me a favor?" I usually only go to the first visit and then for a check-in later on, but last week I had two visits scheduled for the same time and obviously couldn't be at both. Not wanting to cancel, I told Adam and Steven that I'd come for their second visit instead. Now though, I feel bad that I didn't go last time. What if the schedule conflicts were because they didn't have a good time last week? Okay, I know that's not true; they told me it was fine and Steven had a good time, but still....

Steven is an eight-year-old boy with autism, but in Friendship Circle's world, that just means he's unique, like all of us, and that his special talents and abilities make him outstanding. I turn into the neighborhood and pull up to the house. Adam's car is already there. As I'm about to turn off the car, I see something which makes me stop. I suddenly regret all my previous thoughts and thank God for giving me the chance to see this myself. There's Steven, run-



ning ahead of his new friend Adam, with a fishing rod in hand and a smile from ear to ear.

Not wanting to miss anything, I drive around to the other side of the neighborhood pond (I'm kicking myself that I didn't bring my camera). I park and get out of the car to watch as Adam casually and comfortably introduces Steven to the world of fishing. From where I'm standing I can see them but they can't see me, and frankly, I'm glad because I have tears in my eyes. I stand there for a bit just watching the two of them talk and laugh and cast the fishing rod. One thing is clear: To Adam, Steven isn't a "disabled" child who needs sympathy—Steven is a friend with plenty to offer. ☆

Temple Beth El Youth Groups

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weekend conventions bring youth together from the entire Southeast region to learn, worship and explore their Jewish identities. This is one of the most meaningful, engaging opportunities for solidifying relationships and connections to Judaism. Our kids literally count down the days until the next one (January 14-17 for Winter Regional). Keep your eyes open for information regarding Spring Kallah on April 29-May 1 because – we are hosting it. We will need support from the entire Charlotte Jewish community to successfully run this exciting event. Having a high school age child is not required.

Below are two testimonials from teens expressing their appreciation for LIBERTY and NFTY-SAR.

Jake Kalik: "I've been a member of Temple Beth El for 13 years. I love this Temple with all my heart, but LIBERTY really started it off.

"My first LIBERTY event was with Holly Gainsboro, who I love dearly. The events that Holly planned ranged from movie/pizza nights to Hanukkah parties and Havdallah. These events made me how I am now, energetic, social, and exciting.

"Next came Sara Bryan. She always knew how to bring the fun to LIBERTY. From rock-climbing to bowling, LIBERTY is where it's at! She also got me hooked on NFTY (North American Federation of Temple Youth). I went into my first kallah not really sure what to expect, but I met a ton of new friends and had the time of my life.

"I immediately hit it off with our new youth director, Andy Harkavy. His wit and humor took me by surprise. He really steered me down the NFTY path. We just got back from Fall Kallah. I can't

wait to go back to experience more of the awesome song sessions and mixers, Torah studies and host homes. NFTY really showed me how to be Jewish. It made me want to better help our community here in Charlotte.

"I look forward to my next four years in LIBERTY and NFTY. The Temple Youth Program can surely change one's life in a short amount of time."

Rachel Rappaport: "Joining LIBERTY and NFTY are two of the best choices I have ever made in my life. I couldn't imagine my life without them.

"At my first Kallah, I didn't know what to expect other than what my older friends had told me. I heard all these great things but didn't understand why this is what people live for. As soon as I arrived I was greeted by many people, and introduced to so many new friends. I immediately felt at home, these people were all just like me. I couldn't believe how nice and fun everyone was. Then it got better, I got to assist my amazing new friends in song-leading and spent time with old friends while making new ones. I understood pretty much an hour after we got off the bus why everyone was so obsessed: NFTY was the most amazing experience I've ever had. I continue to keep in touch with my friends and am suffering from severe NFTY withdrawal. I encourage everyone to try it because I guarantee you will never look back. NFTY and LIBERTY provide a great way to make friends, learn about Judaism, and about yourself. I cannot even imagine what my life would be without NFTY and LIBERTY." ☆

*NFTY-SAR – North American Federation of Temple Youth – Southern Area Region.



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