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Wednesday 4th of March 2009 8 Adar 5769

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Yaldeinu raises funds to send Bolivians to Canadian camps

By SHERI SHEFA, Staff Reporter
Thursday, 26 February 2009



TORONTO — Yaldeinu is planning to raise funds to bring Bolivian children to Canada for three weeks at a Jewish summer camp.

Yaldeinu founder Michael Ettedgui, second from the left, met with board members of the Jewish community organization in La Paz, Bolivia in October.

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An organization that raises funds to preserve Judaic values through formal and informal education for Diaspora communities, Yaldeinu is teaming up with Jewish students and educators to try to stimulate a dwindling Jewish community in the poorest country in Latin America, Bolivia.

Michael Ettedgui, the founder of the non-profit charitable organization, said his recent trip to Latin America opened his eyes to the need of the Bolivian Jewish community.

"I was there [in Bolivia] in October when I went on a tour of various cities in Latin America to find communities that aren't being helped by Diaspora organizations. The country that hit me the most, that affected me the most, is Bolivia," Ettedgui said, adding that the once vibrant Jewish community of 10,000 has been reduced to about 200.

He said that the recent economic and political turmoil in the country has led to a mass exodus of the Jewish community who live in Bolivia's capital, La Paz.

"My contacts there tell me that because there are so [few] people and because there is basically no funding available to them for formal or even informal Jewish education... young people are assimilating and not showing up to the Jewish community centre for programming."

Ettedgui said that when he met with the board members of the Circulo Israelita, the Bolivian Jewish organization, they were initially seeking funding for Jewish education.

"They had an after-school program called Shorashim. It was a parochial school for the children of the community and... the program was taught by volunteer teachers. But because of a lack of interest, the kids aren't showing up to the program anymore and the parents aren't pushing them to go," Ettedgui said.

"We shifted course and I told them about the camping initiative and that was something they were really excited about, because it is fun and the kids will get much more out of it in terms of the experiential learning."

The camping initiative is a program that raises funds to bring a group of youths from a Diaspora Jewish community — in this case, Bolivia — to spend three weeks at a Canadian Jewish summer camp.

"To bring these children to summer camp here in Canada, I believe, will lead to a Jewish revival within that community. Rather than have them show up to the community centre, and sit down for a lesson being led by volunteer parents in the community, if I can bring them here for three weeks and put them in a Zionist summer camp atmosphere, they'll go back revitalized and more excited about being Jewish," Ettedgui said.

He said he wants to bring six campers between the ages of 13 and 15 and one counsellor from the community to Camp Geshet, which is three hours from Toronto, near Cloyne, Ont.

He is also working on bringing two counsellors in their early 20s from the Jewish community in Cuba, as well as children from the Israeli city of Sderot.

To raise money for this initiative, Ettedgui called on Hillel of Greater Toronto and Birthright Israel alumni to put together a Purim party on March 9 at Tattoo Rock Parlor in Toronto, with the proceeds from the event going toward this campaign.

In addition to the party, Ettedgui is also working with Hillel to help launch *Morrow's Voice*, a student journal that will be distributed on university campuses across the country.

The journal, which will bring in funds by selling ad space, will consist of essays and poetry that tackle three issues: Holocaust education after survivors pass on, Israel advocacy on campus, and the impact of social trends on Judaism.

Submissions, due by April 15, will be vetted by an advisory council that includes the University of Toronto's Jewish Studies director Hindy Najman, U of T Professor Andrea Most and York University Professor Martin Lockshin.

Students with the best submissions will be awarded prizes, including a full-year academic scholarship at the Rothberg International School of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a trip to Israel donated by El Al

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Ettedgui said he is also working with Hillel to organize a summer program that would bring a group of four students to La Paz to do volunteer work. Students would be housed in the homes of Jewish families in La Paz for three weeks in the summer, during which they would volunteer in orphanages, hospitals and schools.

For more information about the camping initiative, visit www.valdeinu.org/bolivia.

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