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From Si-to-C: A Cross-Cultural Experience Lands Cuban Madrichim at Camp George

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Two Cuban madrichim are spending the summer at Camp George with the support of Yaldeinu, an organization that partners with Jewish day schools and camps to provide formal and informal education to Jewish children in various parts of the world.

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By *Stephen Cohen, URJ Camp George Communication Director*



It's no secret, URJ Camps do transform lives. Most camper families know that this is where Jewish values and summer camp meet, and in this sacred union, we create a space for life-long friendships, children gaining independence, communal responsibility, and (a little bit of) freedom for parents across North America. But, a little known fact is that here at URJ Camp George as with our other 12 Union Camps, we also play host to both international campers and staff from various parts of the world. This summer, in Canada, a special shidduch has paved the way for an even greater

impact; transforming the lives of North American and International campers and staff at summer camp in Parry Sound, and transforming realities of Jewish children in Cuba.

Arriving from the dusty shores of Havana, Cuba, Alejandro Eskenazi & Monica Del Pino Meller take time to reflect on their first experience away from their homeland and in doing so shed light on the power of diaspora and community. Our two Cuban madrichim arrived with the support of Yaldeinu, an organization that partners with Jewish day schools and camps to provide formal and informal education to Jewish youth in various parts of the world. Both Monica (25) & Alejandro (20) are part of a special group of Jewish youth living in Cuba, a Jewish population that connects 1500 Cuban Jews to their heritage and Israel. Although the distance between Cuba and Israel is great, the connections can be deep. While sitting at the Camp George waterfront, we're transported to yet another place. A place where the sun shines bright, the sandy beaches await, where friendly faces become charming old friends, and for a small community, Jewish tradition lives. Where, on Friday night to welcome Shabbat - a festive gathering with hundreds of Jews is commonplace.

After a typical day in Cuba, both Monica, an elementary school computer teacher, and Alejandro, a 3rd year university student, (the science of physical education and sports), find themselves at Beth Shalom, one of 3 synagogues in Havana. Beth Shalom known by the Cubans affectionately as, "our Community" is a gathering place for sports and activities, a youth centre, a worship space, a library and pharmacy. Each Jewish "holiday", (including weekly Shabbat services and dinner) welcomes almost 400 "members", when families and friends fill Beth Shalom to engage in prayer, eating & various traditional observances with a Cuban twist. The "Community" is described as an extension of the family, where observance is practiced together, not in the privacy of their homes. "It is where (the Community) we

gather strength" & all types of Jews and friends are welcome. For the Diaspora community in Cuba, intermarriage is common practice. Alejandro's father's side is Jewish, and in Monica's case it's her mother's side. According to Alejandro, "family does not care about your background, but how you feel is what's important". And the feeling is strong. When the Cubans speak of "the Community," they are visibly bustling with emotion, yet their expressions are stifled without the fluidity of their Native tongue. In a place where "...Anti-Semitism does not exist", Alejandro feels both a pride and duty to share his Jewish heritage with his peers.

The community is 400 strong. When probed about its continuity and success, Monica explains, "we don't have money but we have spirit...we feel Judaism very strongly...the kids feel love for Israel, and they love being Jewish." Along with support from Yaldeinu, other international organizations have embraced this Latin Jewish spirit; the Joint Distribution Committee, World ORT, CIE, the Canadian Jewish Congress and others. This partnership in particular, realizes an array of benefits for URJ Camp George, Yaldeinu and all parties involved.

"This experience is a challenge, it's our first time working with foreign kids." From a small community, whose greatest resources are the strength and resilience of its people -- Camp George is place of unimagined dreams. "At this camp, young people have the opportunity to play and interact and also learn about being Jewish, it's amazing, I did not know that this existed". Monica echos, "it's a dream for me, if only I could see my own children here..."


What the future holds, we do not know, but both Alejandro and Monica have another goal. "We will bring Camp George back to our Community (in Cuba). These activities and programs, our experience here -- we may not have the facilities, but we can bring many things back." While we at Camp George strive to provide a Jewishly meaningful summer, we cannot overstate the reciprocal impact of having Monica and Alejandro as part of our special camp community.

We are continually in awe at this opportunity to bring diverse communities to URJ Camp George. Here, there are few limits to the potential for Jewish growth and magical moments that transform our youth, from both near and far.

For more information about the Cuban Jewish Community, visit <http://www.chcuba.org/english/community/history.htm>

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