



Widening The Reach Of Israel Advocacy For Students

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Write On For Israel, an intensive two-year program that trains a select group of high school students to be advocates for Israel through journalism, was launched by The Jewish Week in 2002, at the height of the second intifada. At the time, I never imagined it would be around, or needed, nine years later. But as the program, sponsored by the Avi Chai Foundation, is set to hold graduation ceremonies for 45 high school seniors this week — bringing the total number of Write On alumni to more than 350 — it seems more necessary than ever at a time when the mission faces new challenges to sustain itself.

It's a sad reality that Israel is in many ways more isolated today than at the height of the intifada. Its very legitimacy as a state is being challenged aggressively from many quarters, and there is the likelihood of a Palestinian state coming into being in three months without any accommodations to Israel's concerns.

At the time Write On was conceived nine years ago, with terror attacks an almost daily occurrence, Jewish students on college campuses were reeling from aggressive verbal attacks against the Jewish state by the pro-Palestinian camp. Many Jewish students were sympathetic to Israel's cause but did not have the facts or commitment to advance the Zionist cause.

We at The Jewish Week felt it might be too late to make Zionists out of college students who had little prior knowledge of the Mideast conflict. It seemed to us more practical to focus on 11th and 12th graders, so that by the time they came to campus, they would have the historical knowledge and moral confidence to become leaders of the pro-Israel movement.

Over the years the program has been a great success, and thanks to Avi Chai's generosity and belief in the mission, Write On is now active not only in New York but in Chicago, Cleveland and San Francisco as well. Many of our graduates have gone on to become leaders on campus as early as their freshman and sophomore years, chairing pro-Israel activities and writing for various campus newspapers, making Israel's case.

But as Avi Chai, a major foundation focused on Jewish education, spends down in keeping with its plan to cease funding by the end of this decade, Write On will need to come up with additional support in the next three years to sustain itself in New York and the other three cities.

A development director has been retained to reach out to foundations and individuals here and around the country, calling attention to the benefits of maintaining and expanding the program at this critical time for Israel. There are also plans to launch a modified Write On program for adults.

The New York program for teens meets one Sunday a month during the school year for a full day, combining a variety of disciplines. Program director Linda Scherzer, a former CNN and Israel television correspondent, combines professional expertise and a nurturing style. She brings in guest speakers ranging from prize-winning journalists to Israeli diplomats and Jewish organizational leaders who meet with the group.

Rabbi Yotav Eliach, the core educator whose deep passion for Zionism is palpable, provides the historical context, from biblical times to today, based on the belief that Israel education precedes advocacy.

The students come from public schools, day schools and private schools and work on various assignments, often in teams. This year, for example, one task was to work with a virtual budget and craft a response to Israel Apartheid Week activities on college campuses. With the help of student advisers, who themselves are Write On alumni, the groups offered detailed Power Point presentations.

“It’s a hands-on experience that prepares them for campus activism,” Scherzer noted.

In their senior year, the students devise a class project. One year they published and made available a guide to the Mideast political climate on a wide range of campuses. This year’s class launched and maintains a website, TeensforIsrael.org, as an online advocacy handbook and resource guide.

The highlight of the two-year program is a group visit to Israel where the students meet with government officials, top journalists, military leaders, academics, jurists and others who offer a wide range of perspectives about Israeli life and the Mideast conflict.

Scherzer says she thinks of the Write On program as “a feeder system into the world of pro-Israel activism on campus.”

Trained in writing and public speaking, the high school students benefit from contacts with pro-Israel advocates on campus who are active in Hillel, the Israel on Campus Coalition and other groups. A primary goal is to establish and leverage connections and, once in college, to reach out to uninformed and apathetic Jewish students — and to have the knowledge and self-assurance to stand up in a classroom and respond to an anti-Israel professor, if necessary.

A highlight at the Write On graduation for me each year is to hear from alumni, currently in college, who describe how the information they gained from the program has helped them in their pro-Israel campus activities. While we hope the new graduates will be inspired by the speakers' words and message, we know the professionals involved in Write On are stirred and encouraged as we work to ensure the program's continuation and growth.

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