

Operation Chicken Soup by: Joshua Krakoff

"I feel that no matter what we do, there will always be people who need our help. How can we ignore the homeless?"

The girl looks around, and hugs her knees to her chest. Around her, eighteen other teens sit, considering her words. In the background, the smell of fresh chicken soup mingles with the sound of water bubbling and the quiet hum of the refrigerator. Tonight, these teens have gathered to help make food in a hunger relief project all their own: Operation Chicken Soup.

8,000 Bowls of Kosher Chicken Soup

Operation Chicken Soup was the brainchild of Rabbi Joshua Zweiback. During his tenure at the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan, Rabbi Zweiback worked closely with the teen group to grow and strengthen the community service opportunities available within the institution. Faced with limited space and facilities, the group wanted to create a program that would give teens a forum for exercising decision-making and responsibility, as well as an opportunity to interact with Jewish sources and each other. Thus, Operation Chicken Soup was born.

The design of the plan was simple. Twice a month, teens from public and private schools throughout New York City would come together to prepare food in their own soup kitchen. Ultimately, they would be responsible for making sure the supplies had been purchased and would participate in set-up and clean-up, as well as help determine the recipe for the soup. In addition, time would be set aside each week to discuss Jewish texts regarding tikkun olam, civic responsibility, and community service in light of this project and their lives.

Indeed, the program has been quite successful. Now in its fifth year, Operation Chicken Soup has served over 8,000 bowls of kosher chicken soup, at least 12,000 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and nearly 10,000 packs of carrots and celery to some of New York's hungry men, women, and children. Each month, approximately 15-45 teens participate in this homegrown hunger relief project, donating their time, energy, and effort to see to the needs of people beside themselves.

Or do they? What really motivates teens to attend each month? I am not so naïve to believe that e-mails or postcards are sufficient methods of encouraging attendance. Rather, our institution, like all social service institutions in New York that use teen volunteers, depends on the support we receive from city schools in the form of community service requirements. Many teenagers are required by their schools to complete a certain amount of community service hours in order to be eligible for graduation. Whether this idea was created out of a feeling that teenagers need to be more socially conscious or a plot to make the students work harder to graduate, it has resulted in a major increase in teen participation in community service. So, each September, I visit schools with brochures in hand, ready to grab the attention of any high schools students in desperate need of community service hours. And every month, teens attend with their verification papers in hand, willing to work for credit.

Please do not misunderstand. I do believe that there is a certain community of teens that seek out opportunities to help the community, often as the result of personal affinity or an emphasis on communal responsibility instilled by the family from a very young age. I also will admit that there is a core of teens who attend every single meeting, regardless of outside commitments and school vacations. These teens have spent many hours up to their ankles in chicken broth just to make sure the soup is finished.

Taking Ownership

So how can I account for the difference between the students who show up once or twice, and those who become a major part of the program? I have learned that teens have a tendency to stay with a project if it fills them with a feeling of having done a substantial amount of work, of having really made a difference. By encouraging the teens themselves to take the bulk of the responsibility, they may begin to take ownership for their work and make it part of their monthly ritual. I'll admit this is a somewhat elusive goal, but it is a crucial one for the success of any program.

Celebrating the Successes

Ultimately, all teens are welcome to Operation Chicken Soup, regardless of their initial intention. And while we seek to engage every teen on a personal and emotional level, not every one chooses to come back. But we must celebrate the successes, for they are the source of ultimate inspiration for the future. I leave you with the following quote:

"I have been involved in Operation Chicken Soup for three years, and the experience has truly changed my life. Whether we are cooking soup, making sandwiches, or simply discussing the importance of tzedakah, I always enjoy participating in Operation Chicken Soup. This program provides me with an opportunity to help others in our community, which is one of the most fulfilling ways to spend my time. I have also formed numerous friendships with other teenagers who like to volunteer. When I arrive to cook soup, I always find a group of students who are eager to participate. And when the soup is cooked and packaged, the sense of accomplishment is overwhelming. I am proud to be a part of Operation Chicken Soup."

Bram Alden

Horace Mann Alumni

Rabbi Joshua Krakoff earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theater with a minor in Jewish Studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara. He recently graduated with a Masters in Jewish Education from the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He currently works as the Director of After School and Camping at the JCC in Manhattan, and the Director of Children's Programs at Congregation Beth Simchat Torah.