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Teens develop technology, identity, tikkun olam through filmmaking

By Andrea Waxman
of *The Chronicle* staff

The four teens sitting around the L-shaped table in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee classroom on the third floor of Mitchell Hall, were alert and focused on their teacher's words.

The table was covered with cameras, bags of cables and other camera-related gadgets. Though it was almost 5 p.m. and the teens had already spent a long day in school, they seemed relaxed and engaged. This session was focused on the camera, sound equipment and some of the technical skills they need to make an original documentary movie.

Since March 5 these members of the "Young Jewish Filmmakers' Project," have met weekly to learn the technology of filming and lighting and to discuss, brainstorm and research for their own documentary.

The filmmaking project, the first offering of the Coalition for Jewish Learning's new Mini-School of the Arts, is co-sponsored by docUWM, a division of the UWM Peck School of the Arts film department. It is billed as "a unique opportunity for teens to explore Jewish identity while learning film production."

The group began developing the Jewish identity theme of the film at their first meeting, where they tossed around a variety of ideas. According to home-schooled sophomore Maddie Mandel, 15, of Mequon, some of the first ideas on the list were Jewish community, food, teen life and anti-Semitism.

"We had trouble coming up with a topic at first," according to Nicolet sophomore Rachel

Herman, 16. But the group continued to brainstorm and discuss what it means to be Jewish.

In the end "it was pretty easy to narrow it down according to how many people were interested" in each subtopic, Mandel said. They decided to make a film that looks at Jewish identity "on the inside [of the community] and on the outside," she said.

Two of the teens working on the filmmaking project, 14-year-old Bayside Middle School eighth-graders Noah Rowlett and Noah Laufer, suggested including information to raise awareness about the genocide in Darfur, according to Mandel.

The group has engaged in considerable discussion about that ongoing tragedy and how it connects to Jewish identity, during the group's weekly meetings, Mandel said.

They agreed that if they approached it from the proper perspective, the Darfur issue connects with an important aspect of Jewish identity.

"We all agree that it's important to include [Darfur] in our movie. We feel that it's connected with Jewish identity in that during the Holocaust we [the Jewish people] didn't really get any help and so we have to help the people of Sudan."

The group has since attended and filmed a speech on Darfur by American Jewish World Service president Ruth Messenger on Thursday, May 3, at Congregation Beth Israel.

They also filmed interviews with members of the local Jewish community who attended that speech as well as participants in the "Walk for Israel" on April 23.

They would also like to focus on B'nai Brith Youth



A docUWM graduate student teaches, from left, Maddie Mandel, Rachel Herman and Ari Rothenberg how to use a movie camera during a session of the Coalition for Jewish Learning's "Young Jewish Filmmakers' Project." Photo: Andrea Waxman.

Organization — "because we feel so Jewish when we participate in BBYO — and also Jewish comedians," Mandel said.

Identity and activism

When asked what are the most interesting or valuable things they've learned through the young Jewish filmmakers project, so far, each of the three teens interviewed agreed that one was how to use the camera and two of the three said the other is what they've learned about the genocide in Darfur.

"I learned a lot more [than I already knew] about the camera," said Glen Hills Middle School eighth-grader Ari Rothenberg, 14, a self-described "computer geek."

Because she is learning about the Holocaust in English and social studies classes at school, Rothenberg said, she is able to see parallels between it and what is happening in Darfur. "And I am able to bring [what I am learning about the Holocaust] into the filmmaking class," she said.

docUWM project director Jenny Plevin, a Jewish Milwaukeean who earned her bachelor's degree at the university in film studies, is directing this project. She has been involved in teaching film to children ranging "from 5-years-old through 12th grade," mostly inner city youth, for many years.

But this group has been interesting for her, she said, because "not only are they learning a high level of filmmaking, I think they are learning a lot about their Jewish identities and also about Jewish activism. Talking to passionate Jewish activists [like those who went to hear Ruth Messenger] is rubbing off on them," Plevin said.

"We've talked about Darfur in the context of tikkun olam and that has expanded everyone's view of what their Jewish identity actually is and how they can take it out into the world," she said.

Though three of the students present last week said they had

worked with some form of filmmaking before, and Rowlett claimed, only half jokingly, to be "technological master," Herman said her only prior experience was one or two sessions with a camcorder.

Like Rothenberg, Herman has a strong interest in theater and thought film would be a good medium to explore.

Rothenberg was also motivated to join the class by a documentary she watched as research for a report on the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School, as well as for social reasons, she said.

"I thought maybe I could meet other Jewish kids and maybe this will take me somewhere — maybe into filming and producing and I'll maybe find a career there."

CJL's Mini-School of the Arts, which is supported by a grant from the Helen Bader Foundation plans to operate on a semester cycle. CJL is the education program of The Milwaukee Jewish Federation.

The mini-school will offer classes and projects in a range of art forms that may include dance, music, sculpture, Holocaust theater and other kinds of drama and photography among others, said CJL's teen programming coordinator JoAnne Gaudynski.

In the meantime, the young Jewish filmmakers are going in extra days, staying later and planning to continue on into the summer to get their movie finished, Plevin said.

"They're really into it. They're filming, logging, editing and creating a piece" that they may screen as a fundraiser, probably for Darfur," Plevin said.

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