

On the fringes --- *Jerusalem Post*; Jerusalem; Feb 15, 2002; Melissa Radler;

Troubled American Orthodox youth discover the value of their lives - by putting them in danger.

Two years ago, Matthew had little planned for the upcoming summer other than smoking pot, dropping acid and getting as far away from his school, family and rabbi as possible. "My dad kind of kicked me out of my house, and I got thrown out from a couple of schools," says Matthew, now 16, who asked to be identified by this pseudonym.

With few prospects for help available to him in the Orthodox world, Matthew took off for Brooklyn, where he found a group of like-minded teenagers at Our Place, a community center for at-risk youth in Flatbush.

One day, a representative from Camp Extreme stopped by the center to chat with the teens. Matthew was immediately hooked by the thought of a summer adventure out west, that included rappelling down mountains and visiting Alcatraz - an adventure, it turned out, that would change his life.

These days, Matthew lives at home with his parents and four siblings, and he's planning to enroll in a GED (General Educational Development) high-school-equivalency course. He attended Camp Extreme for the past two summers and he says he's been drug-free for six months. Some of his free time is spent speaking to fellow teenagers about quitting drugs.

Matthew said recently that he can't understand why some of the kids who attended Camp Extreme this past summer ever thought it was hip to get high.

"They were the kind of people who were like, ooh drugs, they're so cool," he said with teenage condescension. He did drugs for depression, he added. He repeated a pearl of wisdom he said he told fellow campers at a Narcotics Anonymous session: "My life's a lot better without that crap."

When asked what turned him around, it's not his parents' threats, his school's admonishments or his rabbi's reprimands that come to mind. Instead, Matthew cited Camp Extreme - an extreme-sports camp for Orthodox teens at risk, and its founder Rabbi AY Weinberg, as the reason why he cleaned up his act.

Camp Extreme's roots go back to 1999, when Weinberg, then director of the National Conference of Synagogue Youth for the Greater Midwest region, was asked to run an outdoor summer program for 22 teenage boys.

Four at-risk teens ended up in the group, and Weinberg noticed that certain activities and group dynamics seemed to help the teens break out of their shell.

"We decided to try a program just for teens-at-risk & take them on the road for 4 weeks," Weinberg said.

Armed with little more than tents and flashlights, appointments at the nearest extreme-sports site and directions to all the glatt- kosher food facilities within a 320-kilometer radius, Weinberg led a group of 18 campers and 10 staff members from Denver to San Francisco for four weeks of white-water rafting, mountain biking, jet skiing and Jewish spiritual renewal.

By the summer of 2001, Weinberg was organizing four groups, including three all-boys and one girls-only session, in Camp Extreme adventures.

Starting from campsites in Denver or Reno, the group ends up at sites like Pier 39 or the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Their traveling from one site to the next in minivans and trucks stops during Shabbat, when the camp takes up residence at empty schools and observes a day of rest.

The population served by Camp Extreme has just recently been recognized by many in the Jewish world as a group worthy of special care and treatment. A 1999 study conducted by the Metropolitan Council on

Jewish Poverty, titled "The Incidence of At-Risk Youth in Brooklyn, New York," found that Brooklyn's 23,000-student yeshiva system includes some 1,500 at-risk youth.

"The extent of the problem, how widespread it is and its alarming growth" was cited as one of the study's most significant findings.

According to the study, 6.6 percent of 14- to 17-year-old Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn (or ninth through 12th graders) are considered at-risk, with problems ranging in severity from drinking and drugs to feelings of isolation and learning disabilities.

The figure, whose source is the local Board of Jewish Education, is well below the overall at-risk rate for Brooklyn teens, which is 10-15%. However, it is much higher than the rate many in the Orthodox community would have thought.

At Camp Extreme, campers aged 14 through 17 arrive with typical at-risk problems. Some are high-school yeshiva drop-outs and many of their families are dealing with the strain and stigma of raising a troubled teen in a community that until recently didn't acknowledge that some religious kids take Ecstasy, have sex before marriage and don't believe in God.

"Being in a Jewish community makes it so much more difficult to help [teens at risk]. People are like, 'Oh my God, you're not going to get a shidduch [marriage partner],'" said Camp Extreme counselor Yehuda Shinensky, a 22-year-old from Maryland. "Acceptance is huge and they feel just so shunned."

David, a 16-year-old camper from Philadelphia for the past two summers, is all too familiar with the effect that his community's lack of awareness has had on his own alcohol and drug abuse.

"There's a lot of talk, a lot of stuff going on behind closed doors and there's not really a support system," said David, who asked not to have his last name published.

Following his first summer at camp, David completed a drug-rehabilitation program. After his second summer, he and his therapist began looking into high-school equivalency programs.

The list of extreme sports offered at the camp is what convinces many of the kids to sign on. But despite its name, the Camp Extreme brochure notes that the sports are merely a means to Weinberg's goal, which is to integrate the kids back into the Orthodox world by summer's end.

"Extreme sports require and instill in them a necessity for teamwork, along with a tremendous sense of pride and accomplishment for doing what many cannot," states the brochure. "By nightfall, they are worn down and more than happy to relax around a campfire, allowing us to have incredible sessions."

"All the kids are stimuli junkies, so we try to stimulate and challenge them without having them do anything illegal," added the camp's drug counselor, Chaim Winter.

When asked what his favorite extreme sports are, David quickly glossed over river rafting and bike riding across the Golden Gate Bridge as if doing them was an everyday occurrence.

"The activities are all right, but it's the people you're with," he said. "It's a lot of support from other people, a lot of learning from other people's experiences."

Another camper, 16-year-old Yitzi from Baltimore, said that the best part of camp was that "it gave me a bunch of friends and a sense of belonging. You know," he said, "here in the Jewish community if you're a rebel, then you're a reject."

The first day of camp is a flurry of drug testing and acting out, said the counselors. Drugs levels are monitored throughout the session and campers who use them are sent home - usually two or three of out a group of 20 among the boys and none, so far, from the girls' group.

Kids addicted to drugs like heroin and cocaine are not admitted, and most campers entering have a substance-abuse history with alcohol, marijuana, mushrooms and acid. Each counselor is assigned three to five campers, and the group lives together in a tent pitched on campgrounds along the route.

While noting that changes in the campers' attitudes toward their drug use and personal problems are often imperceptible during the course of the session, the counselors provided accounts of campers they've managed to open up.

One camper who had a habit of mutilating himself with lit cigarettes burnt a smiley face onto his arm at the start of the session, said counselor Sruli Smith, 22, a psychology student at Touro College in New York. As the session progressed and the camper began making friends, he tentatively asked a fellow camper to help him nurse his arm.

"As soon as he realized people cared, he started caring about himself," said Smith.

Shinensky described a white-water rafting trip that marked a turning point for some campers who had been suffering from depression.

"They were so scared, the water was so cold and everyone was screaming, 'I don't want to die!' Then I was like, 'Oh really, so you don't want to die?' We ended up having a really good [therapy] session after."

Problems, fears, and other issues and concerns are voiced at nightly camper-led Narcotics Anonymous meetings and what Weinberg calls "Yiddishkeit" sessions, which include topics like, "What is the point of Shabbos?" "Why shouldn't I use drugs?" "What is wrong with premarital relations?" and "Is there a God?"

"We'll raise an issue and then we'll allow them to talk about it," said Weinberg of his approach to the sessions on Judaism. "We try to help them understand it in a way that they can relate to it."

Campers' resistance to the Jewish learning sessions is high at first, noted the counselors. Sruli Smith said he talked about girls and sex for the first week of one session to show his campers they could talk to him about anything.

Once the kids begin talking about Judaism, they tend to open up on other issues that are irking them, such as family and school, said Weinberg. "It doesn't mean that next Pessah they're going home and say, 'Okay, I'm ready to observe,'" he said. "But for some it means it registers. They see that [Judaism] does make sense, that there are reasons, it isn't arbitrary."

Weinberg described a camper who was angry with the world when camp began. "All he kept saying was that by his 18th birthday, he's going to kill two people: his father and his mother."

During a Yiddishkeit session, the camper's rage-filled mutterings about his parents were met with a spontaneous song from the other campers. "Suddenly everybody started singing, 'We love you,' and from then on, there was so much less anger," said Weinberg.

A central reason for the kids' opening up to the staff and each other, said Winter, is because "they feel very non-defensive. They're not being preached to. They start thinking about the consequences of their actions. Even if kids go through camp and then into rehab or Priority-1 [an alternative yeshiva geared toward at-risk youth], it's a major step," he said.

After Camp Extreme's first summer, three quarters of the campers who came to camp as high-school dropouts re-enrolled in school. Of the 25% who didn't return to school, some began pursuing a GED.

Among those who returned to school, some headed off to the Torah Academy of Lawrence-Cedarhurst, known as Priority-1, a fully-accredited alternative-yeshiva high school attended by some 40 teens who didn't succeed in the traditional yeshiva setting.

"They [teens at risk] didn't succeed, not because they're stupid," said Priority-1 founder and dean Rabbi Shaya Cohen. "They just didn't fit the mold. Today if you don't make it in the system, you're hurting, you're depressed and you self-medicate," he said.

Winter, the drug therapist, recalled a Priority-1 rabbi who flew out to San Francisco to speak to the kids about returning to school.

"You have to understand, the kids hate rabbis," said Winter. "They said, 'Rabbi, I do drugs, I sleep around.' They have piercings. The rabbi says to them, 'Great! You're one of us.'"

The rabbi Winter is referring to is the principal of Torah Academy, Rabbi Dov Silver, who lamented that some in the Orthodox community have yet to accept teens at risk as their own. Silver noted, however, that awareness is slowly increasing, "Our community was living in a tremendous amount of denial."

When asked if there is a need for more programs to help teens at risk, Miriam Turk, a supervisor at the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services' Boro Park office, said, "Oh gosh, yes. It's out there and people are talking about it, and unfortunately, the most prestigious families are affected by it."

Turk's office runs a summer program for teenage girls at risk. She said that programmers are worried about coming up with funding this year - an indication that broad awareness and support for these troubled teens may not yet exist in the Jewish world.

Though awareness is a key issue, the ability to pay for the programs often takes center stage. At a cost of \$2,000 per week per camper, Weinberg sometimes charges the families as little as 25% of the cost and funds scholarships for others when donations permit.

Upcoming programs Weinberg is looking to secure funding for include a session during Pessah and a year-round high-school equivalency program for the teens. He's also looking into providing week-long getaways for students who are having problems at mainstream schools.

According to Ruchama Clapman, the founder of Mothers Aligned Saving Kids (MASK), whose Boro Park-based group operates a hot line for parents of teens at risk, Camp Extreme has been getting high marks in the community. "They [the campers] come back with a more wholesome attitude in life and more self-confidence," she said.

Clapman was quick to point out that awareness and empathy are still lacking in the community. "There are people that have a hard time hearing about it," she said.

Moshe Bellows, a program board member, applauded Rabbi Weinberg's refusal to look the other way when teens at risk presented themselves in his community. He was also happy that the camp tackles problems that others in the community have avoided for so long.

"As someone who works in both worlds, in the Jewish world as well as the outside 'real world,' I think it's really strong when the leaders of our community say that there's an issue and we have to deal with it," said Bellows. "AY says, 'There's a problem and everyone's talking or whispering about it and I'm going to do something about it,'" he said.

For Yitzi from Baltimore, his life is back on track after one summer of extreme sports and Jewish renewal at Camp Extreme. He realized after the session ended that he wanted to go back to school, but that returning to the 13-hour days at a yeshiva he had dropped out of the previous year was not a good fit. With mediation from his counselor, he discussed his options with his family and settled on home schooling.

One of his former counselors is now his Hebrew teacher. "I had a whole support system working for me," he said.

For more information on Camp Extreme, e-mail campextreme@aol.com.