

Contact: Dr. Alex Grobman Phone: (212) 213-8630 Email: [agrobman@aifl.org](mailto:agrobman@aifl.org)

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From Sandy to Gaza rockets, students weather each other's storms

By Maxine Dovere/JNS.org

NEW YORK-Between Israeli youths going through Hurricane Sandy and American youths experiencing the onslaught of rockets from Gaza, participants of November's America Israel Friendship League's (AIFL) student exchange rode an emotional and historic rollercoaster on both sides of the Atlantic.

Twenty-eight American high school students-members of the AIFL-sponsored Youth Ambassadors Student Exchange (YASE)-returned from Israel Nov. 19 after having witnessed Operation Pillar of Defense, and the rocket fire that prompted it, firsthand.

"I saw a bomb shelter for the first time and heard the 'boom' of an Israeli missile as it intercepted a Palestinian attack while we were at the school Hakfar Hayarok just outside of Tel Aviv," Katy Hall, an 18-year-old senior at Bethany High School in Yukon, Okla., told JNS.org during her group's layover in New York's John F. Kennedy airport on the way home to Oklahoma.

Earlier in the month, the Americans' 22 Israeli counterparts in the U.S. just prior to the onslaught of Hurricane Sandy, spending their first week as guests of host families in Oklahoma,

Virginia Beach, and New York. The New York-based group experienced the unprecedented events of one of history's worst natural disasters. At the beginning of week two, the entire group met in Washington, D.C., for an intense four-day learning program, and then traveled together to New York City.

YASE, a 30-year-old student exchange program that focuses on bi-national cooperation, education, and cultural understanding. YASE is the only public high school exchange between Israel and the U.S., and works in partnership with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the American Association of School Administrators and the Israel Youth Exchange Council.

Following their New York schedule, the entire YASE contingent of 50 (between the American and the Israelis) flew to Israel, arriving in Tel Aviv on Nov. 8, and was welcomed into the homes of their Israeli host families. The Israeli group from Rishon LeZion who had experienced "Sandy" directly took their New York peers home.

Then came Operation Pillar of Defense, the Israel Defense Forces action intended to stop the rockets being fired from Gaza. "The first priority was to assure the safety and security of every participant," AIFL Chairman Kenneth Bialkin told JNS.org while the American students were still in Israel. "Everyone is safe, everyone, is eager to stay for the full program. These are exceptional young people, exhibiting the highest ideals of friendship."

The American students included delegates from many ethnic and religious backgrounds-African American, Chinese, East Indian Pakistani, Albanian and others. They were Christians (including an Egyptian Coptic student), Muslims, Hindus, and Jews. Everyone was in contact with his or her parents. During the course of the intense program, the students formed strong bonds with their Israeli peers and developed a strong sense of belonging. The annual YASE program follows a meticulously planned curriculum comprised of academic, cultural and community activities and experiences throughout both the American and Israeli segments. When the Israeli contingent to New York-students mostly from Rishon LeZion, chaperoned by Sigal Greenfeld Mittelman- arrived there York just days before Sandy, they had no idea what awaited them.

"Sandy created a really awful situation," Mittelman told JNS.org. "I had to keep the kids calm and assure their safety-especially without electricity." Their parents in Israel were worried, and because there was no phone service for days, could not contact their children. Email and Skype helped Mittelman keep parents 6,000 miles away as calm as possible.

The American students scheduled to be in Rishon LeZion weathered a different kind of storm. It was the same New York contingent that had hosted their peers from Rishon LeZion during Sandy. They had to be moved from Rishon LeZion to the Israeli Ministry of Education-run boarding school of Hakfar Hayarok.

"All the American kids were in constant contact with their parents," Cassia Anthony, program director of AIFL, told JNS.org. Every attempt was made to maintain the students' original schedule, although the base was moved from Tel Aviv to Haifa. The students were able to visit schools, the Baha'i Shrine and Technion-Israel Institute of Technology. But due to the rockets, the American students returned to the U.S. Nov. 19, curtailing their program by two days.

Dr. Charlotte K. Frank, Chairman of the Executive Committee of AIFL and the initiator of the YASE program, praised the forbearance of the student ambassadors. "The way these kids have responded is a miracle," she told JNS.org. "The students survived an unprecedented encounter with Hurricane Sandy in New York lived through another 'storm'-this time, of rockets and Israeli resilience. Their amazing experiences on opposite sides of the world will give them an even greater depth of understanding."

"These young men and woman learned to live together, to survive together and to grow with their experiences," Frank added. Michele Ayers, a teacher at Oklahoma's Bethany High School and a chaperon for the nine students from that school who participated in YASE, told JNS.org from Kennedy Airport on Monday that the students "felt very safe in Israel." Ayers described the city of Yukon, where Bethany High is based, as "a very conservative Protestant community." She called the YASE trip "such a growing opportunity for the kids."

"To be immersed in the Jewish and Israeli culture and learn so much about the Jewish people was amazing... Being in Israel was a great learning experience-though perhaps not at the best

time," she said. The students' Israeli host families "knew exactly what to do," and were "like having family from a half a world away," Ayers said.

Though the students were not alarmed, Ayers said she understood why the students had to return from Israel, when rockets began to fall as far north as the suburbs of Tel Aviv.

Hall, the Bethany High senior, said the Israel experience widened her understanding of her own beliefs.

"God is so alive here," she told JNS.org. "The Jewish people are His chosen people. Being in Israel is so surreal, so beautiful." "The news doesn't tell the true story of Israel," Hall added.

Ayers said the Bethany High delegation is "going to go back" to Israel, but even if they don't return, the Jewish state clearly left an impression on them that won't fade anytime soon.

"There's a part of my heart that remains in Israel," Ayers said. "I'll never be the same."