

Alumni Shabbaton Rekindles NCSY Inspiration

BY SUSAN JACOBS



NCSY alumna Debra (Wallin) Kapnick of Fairfield, Connecticut (left), chats with fellow alumna Sissy Berger of Passaic, New Jersey, at the Alumni Shabbaton, which drew more than two hundred and fifty people. Photos: Pasquale Cuomo

There were no advisors on door duty and no mandatory curfews, but the NCSY Alumni Shabbaton, held in Edison, New Jersey, in February 2006, captured the classic NCSY (National Conference of Synagogue Youth) experience in nearly every other way.

On Shabbat, there were songs, sessions, *divrei Torah*, shtick and, of course, “ebbing,” the time-honored NCSY tradition of spending the last moments of Shabbat listening to inspiring stories and singing together in a chorus of hundreds of voices. After Shabbat, the band members broke out their instruments for Havdalah and dancing, and later in the evening, there was a hearty *melaveh malkah* along with carnival games and an alumni band concert featuring songs and musicians from five decades of NCSY.

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Susan Jacobs, an NCSY alumna from Charleston, West Virginia, is a writer based in Pittsburgh.

more ‘adult’ way,” says Debra (Wallin) Kapnick of Fairfield, Connecticut. “Plus they didn’t make us sleep on the floor of a synagogue.”

Instead, participants slept in hotel rooms at the Holiday Inn in Edison. More than two hundred and fifty people, including NCSY alumni, their spouses and children, participated in Shabbat activities; approximately one hundred more came on Saturday night. They came from near and far, some traveling from as far away as California and Israel.

“It was exactly what I was hoping for,” says Rabbi David (“Rabbi Dave”) Felsenthal, director of NCSY alumni, who organized the weekend. “There were a lot of friends who were reunited.” Kapnick encouraged several friends to join her for the weekend, and about a half dozen of them came.

“It was a fabulous experience,” says Kapnick. “We felt the *ruach*, the connection with people who shared the same values and aspirations.”

Rebecca Bram Feldbaum was among the friends who came to the *Shabbaton* at Kapnick’s urging. The two became acquainted in 1975 while they were regional presidents—Kapnick, the New England regional president from Trumble, Connecticut, and Feldbaum, the Southern regional president from Little Rock, Arkansas. They went on to become roommates at Touro College.

“It just gave me a very good feeling and brought back a lot of memories,” says Feldbaum of the *Shabbaton*. “[Once] you’ve been in NCSY there’s always a bond.”

Many former NCSYers credit the youth movement with deeply affecting their lives, whether by inspiring them to become religiously observant or by infusing their already observant lifestyle with deeper meaning. Feldbaum says the NCSY experience follows participants throughout their lives.

“You have the same experience, the same questions,” she says. “We’ve all been there. These are people who can

really understand where you're coming from."

In the early days, NCSY reached out to children whose families belonged to Orthodox congregations but were not necessarily traditionally observant. Even among those who were observant, many attended public school or small day schools in isolated communities and needed encouragement and reinforcement to maintain their observance. From its inception, the NCSY model of joyfully observing Shabbat with singing, dancing, inspiring *divrei Torah* and sessions in which teenagers were encouraged to ask questions about Judaism and to study Torah texts worked phenomenally well. A young Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach was a fixture at early events, and his music was the catalyst that inspired many teenagers to return to their heritage.

Fifty years later, the NCSY *Shabbaton* is basically the same, though the organization is constantly responding to the evolving American Jewish community by creating new initiatives to reach Jewish youth including Jewish culture clubs at public schools and summer learning programs.

"NCSY still has a remarkable impact on teenagers," says Danny Butler of Pittsburgh, a former Central East regional director who attends several *Shabbatonim* each year throughout the United States to speak to and inspire NCSYers. "The kids are different, but they still have the same reaction to the message of NCSY. At every age level the magic of NCSY seems to endure," says Butler. "These people [at the *Shabbaton*] found something in NCSY they wanted to come back into contact with."

Butler and his wife, Dr. Nina (Novetsky) Butler, who met in NCSY, connected with a lot of old friends at the *Shabbaton*. Both Butlers were featured speakers during the weekend, and in his stirring "ebbing" remarks, Danny reminded participants that the core

message of NCSY is one of optimism—that it is possible to reach out to Jewish youth and to inculcate within them a love of Judaism. He also noted that NCSY's greatest successes over the years have been in reaching teenagers in small Jewish communities who yearn for con-

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nections to Judaism. He regaled participants with stories of how he transported truckloads of kosher catered food to small communities throughout the Central East region during his days as



The next generation of NCSYers enjoys the Saturday night festivities.

regional director. Butler, like several regional directors of his era, took on the mantle of leadership while still a college student.

Kapnick was another such regional director. "From my college dorm I ran the New England region," she says. During her years of NCSY involvement, she met her husband, Rabbi Steven Kapnick, and was also inspired to choose special education as her career path.

During Shabbat, participants were able to choose from among fifteen sessions, whose topics ranged from Torah study to Israeli politics to discussions of contemporary social and religious issues. Some sessions explored the ways in which alumni can support NCSY as well as how the organization might evolve to continue to reach diverse populations of Jewish teenagers. Participants also had the opportunity to address the challenges of instilling within their own children the passion for Judaism that NCSY nurtured within them. As alumni reconnected with one another, some found that they had endured similar life challenges, such as infertility and the death of spouses, and could offer each other emotional support.

"When you go through difficulties, you [learn to] appreciate what you have," says Feldbaum who, as a featured speaker, gave advice on how to help others in times of crisis. She drew upon her experience as a young widow, which is the subject of her book *If There's Anything I Can Do...* Returning to NCSY with one of her daughters helped Feldbaum, now of Baltimore, recognize how much her life had changed since her youth in Arkansas and the role that NCSY played in that transformation.

"It hit me with full force how far I had come," she says. "It filled me with so much pride." Her commitment to living an Orthodox life has helped her find the strength to endure life's difficulties. "I am so grateful to NCSY, where it all began," she says.

Rabbi Dave is already planning other alumni events, including gatherings in Baltimore, Chicago and Israel, in addition to another reunion *Shabbaton* next year in the New York area and a Shavuot celebration in Los Angeles in 2007. "It has led to a lot of excitement," he says. "A lot of people have volunteered to get involved." Kapnick hopes to attend future events. "I think everybody felt very uplifted," she says. "It was a real shot in the arm." **IA**