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“Focus the Nation”

by Matt Lehman

When students from Hillel on campuses across the country travel to New Orleans each year to rebuild houses destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, they learn about the devastating effects of climate change on the natural barriers protecting the city. When students from Hillel spend a week on an organic farm as part of an alternative break trip, they learn about the importance of sustainable farming and how it promotes *tzedek* (justice) within as well as outside the Jewish community. When students are on campus, they seek equally compelling ways to pursue social justice.

On January 30 and 31, 2008, the University of Kansas Hillel emerged as a leader in campus environmental activism through its work on a project called “Focus the Nation” (www.focusthenation.org). “Focus the Nation” is a national initiative that sought to make climate change a major campaign issue in the 2008 U.S. presidential and Congressional elections.¹

Hillel designs programs and initiatives to meet at least one of the three “highs”: high-visibility, high-contact, and high-impact. High-visibility programs promote Jewish life and values on campus in a prominent way. High-contact programs create an opportunity to meet a large number of people at one time. High-impact initiatives seek to create a meaningful Jewish experience for the participants. Sustainability programming in general has produced many new avenues to achieve these “high” goals. “Focus the Nation,” in particular, uniquely presented the opportunity to meet all three in one initiative.

KU Hillel initiated the University’s involvement in “Focus the Nation” after twelve of its student leaders participated in the Everett *Tzedek* Social Action Project² and created a series of projects focused on climate change and environmental sustainability.³ After filming a documentary about student perception of climate change,⁴ explaining the virtues of compact fluorescent light bulbs, buying locally grown food, and greening the Hillel building, the students were eager to develop a much larger initiative to discuss environmental issues on campus.

Students on more than 100 college campuses created events to engage their local elected officials in a dialogue about climate change and about what actions can be taken today to ensure the health of the planet tomorrow. At the University of Kansas, Hillel students partnered with the KU Center for Sustainability, KU Environs (a campus environmental group), and Delta Force (a campus social action group) to put together

the two-day KU “Focus the Nation” event.⁵ These partnerships enhanced Hillel’s credibility and visibility on campus and, at the same time, helped expose non-Jewish students to core Jewish values.

The event consisted of two primary components, a teach-in and a roundtable discussion.⁶ Students approached faculty and encouraged them to integrate climate change, as it pertained to their subject area, into their classes either on the day before or the day of the roundtable. Among the more than fifty courses that participated, an industrial design course explored environmentally-friendly building design, a Cuban film course screened a documentary about sustainability in Cuba, and the introductory French and Hebrew classes learned climate change vocabulary.

On the evening of January 31, as events began across the country, more than four hundred University of Kansas students, faculty, and Lawrence community members, (Jewish and non-Jewish alike) convened at the Dole Institute of Politics to debate climate change policy from local, state, and national perspectives.

Moderated by eco-journalist Simran Sethi of NBC and the Sundance Channel, the panel featured local, state, and nationally elected officials, including U.S. Representatives Nancy Boyda and Dennis Moore (who participated through video conference from a Democratic retreat in Virginia); Kansas Lieutenant Governor Mark Parkinson; KU Provost Richard Lariviere; Kansas State Senators Marci Francisco and Roger Pine; Kansas State Representatives Barbara Ballard, Paul Davis, Tom Holland, and Tom Sloan; and Lawrence City Commissioners Michael Dever and Boog Highberger. Students were able to submit questions in advance, as well as on the night of the roundtable. Topics included climate change in Kansas, coal, renewable energy, “green collar” industries and job creation, and environmental leadership. These are the issues that college students know they will encounter upon graduation.

The most interesting point to emerge was not the ideas and policy proposals presented by the elected officials. Rather, it quickly became evident that student passion for finding real solutions to the issue of climate change won the day. As one Dole Institute staff member noted after the event, “This auditorium has not been this full for an event all year and we certainly never have had even close to this number of students.”

Climate change and environmental sustainability has proven to be a successful engagement strategy, both because it is relevant to the everyday lives of students and because it offers a clear connection to Jewish values of *tikkun olam*. College students always will seek ways to impact their world, and many see sustainability as they challenge of their lifetimes. They see their involvement in pursuing sustainability as a means to do something significant today that it is critical for their future.

For the Jewish students in attendance, there is no better reason to pursue real solutions to climate change than simply the duty to repair the world. None of the students was naïve enough to believe that pragmatic solutions would be enacted overnight and they understand that the best ideas are likely yet to be developed. But *Pirke Avot* reminds

us that “it is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, yet you are not free to desist from it.”⁷ This is the spirit that drives today’s college students and “Focus the Nation” highlights the unyielding drive of the student generation to seek a more sustainable, environmentally-conscious future. As Jewish students at the dawn of the twenty-first century, KU Hillel members not only understand, but also fully embrace the responsibility of creating a better future for themselves and those around them.

Endnotes:

1. In 2009, “Focus the Nation” teams will take the teach-in off campus to become a resource for education on clean energy in their communities. To make the most impact possible, Focus teams will take the energy and expertise of student leaders and educators off campus and into neighboring communities in each of the 435 Congressional districts around the country.
2. <http://www.kansan.com/stories/2007/apr/24/warming>
3. <http://www.kansan.com/stories/2007/oct/25/Sustainability>
4. See the film at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5EEN3ayZ0tM> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAfKiHFRYNq>
5. http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2008/jan/28/initiative_focuses_attention_global_warming
6. <http://www2.ku.edu/~sustain/FTN.shtml>
7. *Pirke Avot* 2:21.

Matt Lehrman was Program Director at the University of Kansas Hillel Foundation from September 2005 through August 2008. During that time, he implemented a program vision that included a significant focus on the relationship between Jewish values and our environment as a means of connecting with Jewish students and encouraging a lifelong commitment to Judaism. Matt is currently a first-year student in the Master of Business Administration program in the School of Business at the University of Kansas and is developing sustainability content for the MBA curriculum.
malehrman@gmail.com