**14603, Stephen Lasky**

Good Evening Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to thank you for the opportunity to serve as the youth director here. Being a youth director means being a mentor to the youth you serve. Being a good leader means leading by serving and with you that means mentoring them. What makes a good mentor? The last couple of weeks I have taken a lot of time to think about who served as mentor to me. It was a tough decision to just pick one since there have been so many positive and caring influences in my life. So I thought about what aspects of my life have meant the most to me, and who inspired me during those moments. I thought about my experiences living, learning, and teaching in the Jewish community. It was still difficult for me to just pick 1 or 2 mentors to talk about.

About 3 weeks ago when I was moving out some last minute personal items from my old room in Colorado and I found a speech that I wrote while I was in Israel for the first time. It was a part of one of the programs when we were in Eilat. Some of the kids never got a Hebrew name so everyone was given the opportunity to either pick a Hebrew name for themselves or present something to the rest of the group, whether it was piece of artwork, a song, or speech. I chose to speak about poverty. When I thought about why I would write about poverty I remembered that in high school I developed a love and passion for social action when I was involved with youth group back home. In youth group I was greatly influenced and grew as a person on a professional, social, and spiritual level. That was only possible because of my youth group director named Heather Feinberg. She taught me so much about life and how we can make a difference in the lives of others through social action. She truly inspired me to want to make a difference in the world around me.

Heather made a real difference in my life because she reached out to me. I was very shy as a kid. I had my group of friends at school. But it was difficult for me to socialize on que and break into new groups outside of school. I didn’t really know there was a youth group or Jewish programming for kids until Heather connected with me. She called me on a weekly basis and stopped me in the halls to say hi when I was at the synagogue for Sunday School. The first couple of times she invited me to programs I managed to find an excuse to get out of it. But a couple of weeks later she took a different approach. Instead inviting me to a program as a participant, she asked if I would be available to help with a program for the younger kids. At this point I thought, “Well I like working with kids, and it doesn’t force me to awkwardly socialize with other groups, and it will get Heather off my back.” But, I decided to participate in the program instead of just sitting back and criticizing. Heather had me figured out. She knew the best method was to get me interested and invested, not just force me to participate.

Attending this program became a life altering step for me. Working with kids, and having the opportunity to help with Jewish programming gave me a new sense of energy and empowerment that I haven’t experienced before. This led me to attend most youth group programs, then attend NFTY events, then go to Jewish summer camp, and finally run for the board. Heather was a huge piece of this. She wasn’t just the person that invited me to programs, she was a pusher. She pushed me to go to these programs, she pushed me to run for board, and she pushed me to improve on my social and leadership skills. More importantly she was the kind of support I needed at the time because she was also a believer. She made me believe that I could do more than I was giving myself credit for. She sent me to a leadership training conference at Hebrew Union College to learn and acquire more ways of what it takes to be a good leader. The following summer she sent me on scholarship to Kutz Camp, for further leadership training. By this time I spent less time with youth group because I was busy trying to balance school, social action clubs I was a part of, and friends.

But Heather never stopped reaching out to me. My senior year she asked me if I wanted to be co-chair for the NFTY winter Chavurah. This was a huge deal, and a great responsibility and I didn’t expect to have been chosen. But through this process. I learned how to network, delegate chores, and to be a team player. Because of these experiences, it helped give me the confidence in myself to accomplish what I want. I made long lasting relationships with the kids I met in these experiences, and it helped me develop my Jewish identity. As a result of this, I owe much of the credit to my youth group director. Because she was what I needed at the time, which was a supporter, pusher, and believer. I’ll bet Heather was truly relieved when I graduated out of youth group and moved up to college.

I brought these experiences and lessons with me to college where I worked part-time as a religious school teacher for first and fourth grade. That is where I developed a strong relationship with my boss and Jewish educator Katherine Schwartz. She too, was a pusher and believer. She pushed me to create and lead new class lessons where the kids would find it fun and inspirational. She believed that I could pursue a career in Jewish education, so much that she sent me on an interim program at Hebrew Union College to learn about the Jewish education Master’s program. She also asked me to lead programming for an experimental program where kids have the opportunity to participate in a program where they learn a different aspect of Judaism that they might not have the opportunity to learn during Sunday School. She was also great influence in sense that she was constantly looking for more ways to bring meaning of Jewish education for the kids and her staff.

With the experiences I have attained I can confidently say that with this new position that I am going to be the supporter, pusher, and believer for the youth in order for them to develop professionally, socially, and spiritually with the Jewish community, the way I did when my mentors pushed, supported and believed in me.

Thank you