Aliyah Lasky

Mentors Speech

What makes a good mentor? These 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 then I thought about what aspects of my life have meant the most to me, and who inspired me during those moments. This led me to think about my experiences living, learning, and teaching in the Jewish community. Even trying to narrow that down, it was difficult for me to just pick 1 or 2 mentors to talk about. It wasn’t until about 3 weeks ago when I was moving out some last minute personal items from my old room in Colorado. In one of my dresser drawers 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 that to the rest of the group, whether it was piece of artwork, a song, or speech. I chose to speak about poverty. This then got me thinking about why, of all things, to write about poverty.

I then remembered that it was because in high school I developed a love and passion for social action when I was involved with youth group back home. In youth group was definitely a huge aspect of my life where I was greatly influenced and grew as a person on an professional, social, and spiritual level. That wouldn’t have been possible without my youth group director named Heather Feinberg. Now as a kid, I was pretty shy. Yes, 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 reached out to me. She would call me on a weekly basis and would stop 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 would manage to find an excuse of getting out of it. But a couple of weeks later she took a different approach. Instead inviting to an 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, it doesn’t force me to awkwardly socialize with other groups, and it will get Heather off my back.

Attending this program would be an life altering step for me. Working with kids, and having the opportunity to help with Jewish programming made me a new sense of energy and empowerment that I haven’t experienced before. This would lead me to attend most youth group programs and then attend NFTY events and then go to Jewish summer camp and then run for board. Heather was a huge piece of this. She wasn’t just the person that invited me to programs. But 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. To me this was a huge deal, and 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 helped me develop my Jewish identity. As a result of this, I owe some 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 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. And she was a believer where she believed that I could pursue a career in Jewish education, so much to the fact 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 too was a great influence for 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, like how I did.