

As seen in



June 8, 2012

Start Me Up! projects span many needs

LEISAH WOLDOFF
Managing Editor

A group of 10 young adults has spent the past nine months actively working on ways to improve the quality of Jewish life in the Valley, spanning from arts and education to leadership and legal aid.

They participated in what Emily Mallin, one of the fellows in Valley Beit Midrash's Start Me Up! fellowship, described as "a crash course on how to create a successful social startup while we cultivated our own ideas of innovative projects we could bring to the community."

On May 30, the fellows, along with Rabbi Darren Kleinberg, the program's director, held a *siyum* during which they reflected and evaluated the work they've done since the program launched in September 2011.

When asked about the highlights of the first year, several fellows listed working with each other, and with Kleinberg, as among the top.

"It has been a highlight for me to be able to brainstorm ideas and learn techniques along with other young Jewish entrepreneurs here in Phoenix," wrote Todd Herzog in an email. "All of the fellows are extremely bright and motivated, and they have each challenged me to refine my thinking and to come up with relevant and innovative ways of engaging the Jewish community here in Phoenix."

"Another strong highlight of the program was the opportunity to meet with startup entrepreneurs from all over North America," Michelle Distel wrote in an email. "Hearing their stories, challenges and advice inspired and empowered the group. Add to the mix a few professional-led sessions, and it couldn't have been better."

During the summer, the fellows will complete their proposals, which will be considered by an advisory committee made up of six community members, as well as Kleinberg and representatives from Upstart Bay Area and the Jewish Community Association's Outreach Council.

If a project is deemed ready to go at that point, funding will be granted and the program could be ready to debut later this year.

The second year of the two-year fellowship will include assigning local mentors to the fellows as they develop their projects, as well as peer-learning opportunities, Kleinberg said. The fellows will also explore partnerships with existing Jewish organizations to avoid duplication.

The fellowship's goal is to have a venture fund of \$100,000 to invest in creative projects, Kleinberg said. "We fully expect that by the end of the summer."

So far, the fellowship has received a \$50,000 allocation from the Jewish Community Association and a \$15,000 grant from the Jewish Community Foundation, as well as gifts from Randy Sherman of the Friedel Family Foundation and Josh Wertlieb and Rebecca Light.

"It gives me tremendous hope as I spend time in dialogue with this next generation of leaders," said Elana Storch, who has been a leader in the Valley Jewish community since she moved to the Valley 21 years ago and is part of the program's advisory committee.

"It really promises to effect great change as a the new generation carries us forward to Jewish life in the 21st century."



Celebrating the completion of the first year of Start Me Up! are, from left, Emily Mallin, Rachael Don, Brett Kurland, Cory Shapiro, Todd Herzog, Rabbi Darren Kleinberg, Sam Saks, Virginie Polster, Rachel Hoffer, Michelle Distel and Ariel Gold.

Photo courtesy of Rabbi Darren Kleinberg

Start Me Up! projects

The fellows and their projects are as follows:

Michelle Distel, education director at Congregation Or Chadash, and **Brett Kurland** have partnered to develop *ishJew/phx*, a web portal for Jewish life in Phoenix.

Rachael Don's project is The Blooming Plate, with a goal to create a K-5 curriculum for Jewish schools based on nutrition and healthy eating that is rooted in Jewish values.

Ariel Gold is "putting together a core of people to develop a project to engage Jews in the local struggle for racial, economic and social justice," he wrote in an email.

Musician and songwriter **Todd Herzog**, the cantorial soloist at Temple Solel, is in the process of developing an arts and culture series appealing primarily (but not limited to) younger Jews in their 20s through 40s in the Phoenix area. The series will have several components to it, according to Herzog, such as a music festival, a film screening, a theater production and a visual art component. "All of the events will be high-caliber, cutting-edge arts events, and I plan to work in conjunction with already existing entities in the Valley," Herzog wrote in an email.

Rachel Hoffer is working on a leadership development program for teens. "LAP (Leadership Adventure Program) is designed to engage Jewish teens and offer leadership training and Jewish education through high-energy activities in a compressed Jewish camping experience," Hoffer wrote in an email.

"These 'retreats' will further their commitment to Judaism and the importance of being meaningful leaders and givers in their community, while allowing them to interact with other like-minded teens."

Emily Mallin aims to create a Jewish storytelling project, similar to StoryCorps, the national storytelling project highlighted on National Public Radio each week. "The idea is that family members and close friends will share and record their conversations to keep for themselves. The conversations will also be archived on a searchable website, serving as a collective experience of our community," she

wrote in an email.

Virginie Polster is developing The Learning Shuk, "an online platform where the Greater Phoenix K-12 community will be able to find, request and contribute Jewish learning that is relevant, meaningful and accessible," she wrote in an email. "Learning opportunities will include online content, distance learning, and local learning available to families regardless of affiliation."

Polster, along with Lisa Pinkus, who is developing the *shuk* with Polster, and Rabbi Elana Kanter recently received a coaching/consulting grant from Darim Online for a project called Mensch Modules, a joint project between the *shuk* and The Women's Jewish Learning Center.

Sam Saks, one of the co-founders of the Arizona Jewish Lawyers Organization, took what he's learned from Start Me Up! to develop the organization further, with plans to grow the board and establish an advisory board. His project is a Jewish legal aid program that will offer free or low-cost legal education and services to local community organizations and vulnerable members of the Jewish community.

Cory Shapiro entered the fellowship with an already successful program, ShabbatLuck, a Shabbat potluck for young Jewish adults in their 20s and 30s that he helped co-found. He is interesting in helping sustain ShabbatLuck into the future, as well as help it grow.

It was "exhilarating to be with enthusiastic young leaders who share a vision of communal involvement beyond themselves," Gil Rosen, one of the committee members involved in the process, wrote in an email. "This is an important building block and model for our Jewish community."

"These talented individuals truly want to make a difference in our community," wrote Eddie Lange, another committee member. Other committee members are Steve Goldstein, Bryan Kort, Harriet Rosen and Elana Storch.

— Leisah Woldoff