

**BUKHARIAN TEEN LOUNGE PRESENTATION:
WCJCS CONFERENCE IN JERUSALEM
JUNE 24, 2007**

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Introduction

JCCA is a 185 year old child and family service agency, which had its origins as the Hebrew Orphan Asylums of the mid-1800's, in New York, and has evolved into a major social service agency that annually serves 12,000 of the most troubled children, youth and their families, of all ethnic backgrounds, in the N.Y. metropolitan area. (Today, JCCA provides foster care, residential treatment, outpatient preventive mental health, group homes, and services in the Jewish community such as adoption, early childhood programs, programs serving youth with special needs and autism, and services for the Bukharian immigrant community.) JCCA is a member agency of the UJA-Federation of New York.

The Bukharian Teen Lounge was established in 1999, through a generous start-up grant from UJA-Fed. of N.Y., in direct response to an identified need in the Jewish community. With 40,000 Bukharian Jews having emigrated to Rego Park, Queens in the early 90's, the community's rabbis, lay leaders, parents and social service professionals noted the lack of any organized after school programs for their youth and they feared the "lure" of the streets, gangs, drugs and violence for these youth in transition. JCCA, with its vast experience and expertise with youth-at-risk and a strong interest in developing programs for the Jewish community, chose to create a program in response to this dire need.

We developed a "preventive services" program, with multiple points of entry for many types of youth, and to build on their strengths through: Jewish identity strengthening, recreational and social programs, college and career preparation, leadership skills building, cultural broadening, counseling and support, and independent life skills.
Build it and they will come.....and they did. The house is now crowded with teens, 3 to 4 days per week, after school thru early evenings....

A. What is the Impact of the Immigrant Experience?

All of us who work with immigrants, know that by definition, they are “at risk.” It is important that we acknowledge the “trauma” of being an immigrant, and its life-long duration. Sophia Romma, a 33-year old American playwright and poetess, born in Moscow and based in New York, writes: “The immigrant is an altered soul who never really belongs. You lose your roots, but you never become fully American.” (NY Jewish Week, 2007)

Eric Erikson, renowned psychologist, also acknowledges the various stages of the immigrant experience, in his 1959 classic, *Identity and the Life Cycle*: “Immigration is a crisis that is equivalent to a turning point in life when we have the potential to move forward or to regress.”

And those of you who live in Israel know so well the effect of immigration on family life, across the board. Author, Belozersky, (of *New Beginnings, Old Problems*,) writes: “Immigration, with its accompanying feelings of uprootedness and numerous losses, is a profound stressor, disrupting the functioning of even the strongest families and individuals.”

There has been much discussion in the literature about the goals of assimilation, acculturation and integration. While acculturation and assimilation are described as processes by which a person takes on the customs and norms of mainstream society, integration implies that each ethnic group maintains its own cultural heritage, and simultaneously has close contacts with other ethnic groups....

Integration is viewed as the “healthier” process, because the immigrant is not denying a part of his past. Integration has been a guiding principle of our design of this program....

B. Who are the Bukharians? What has been their journey and experience?

(Hebrew quote from Pirke Avot, Chapter 3, by Akavya ben Mahalalel): “Da M’ayin Batah, U L’an Ata Holech.” “Know where you came from; know where you are going.....”

Bukharians are a 2500-year old Jewish community, who originated in Persia, and via the Silk Road, settled in Central Asia in 500 BCE, in the former Soviet Republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. (Bukhara is among the three largest cities of Uzbekistan, and hence the name for Jews of that region.)

Bukharian families are tight-knit, insular, and male dominated, with distinct and traditional roles for men and women. The people were heavily influenced by the dominant Moslem values and culture, with almost no exposure to Western ways. They were permitted to practice their Judaism in quiet moderation, and thereby preserved their strong sense of Jewish commitment. (They built synagogues, learned Jewish texts that were transliterated from Hebrew, and were spiritually connected to Israel.) Intermarriage was unheard of, and is still considered taboo today. Families gathered to celebrate life-cycle events and Jewish holidays in the large courtyards of their homes.

Enter the early 90’s... With the growth of Islamic fundamentalism, Bukharians felt threatened and fled the Taliban in great numbers, emigrating to New York and Israel. The 40,000 who settled in Queens, had never been a monolithic community, and were suddenly thrust together into a dense, urban environment, living in high-rise apartment buildings, and struggling with

poor English skills. With limited financial resources, (10% of this community live below the poverty line today...) their choices of jobs and careers were severely limited, and their overall transition to America has been difficult.

C. What sensitivities were critical in establishing an immigrant teen program?

- 1) We felt it was important to provide a separate Bukharian teen program, rather than attempting to integrate and mix them with American born teens....and so we rented a small house that is owned by the local JCC/Y, located a block away from Forest Hills' main public high school; the house has a "run down" storefront look to it, is sparsely furnished and has a small backyard. We aimed to keep the program separate because:
 - a) These teens did not become involved in public school activities nor did their community provide any organized program alternatives;
 - b) Their parents were fearful of their children socializing with other ethnic groups and non-Bukharians; (assimilation and intermarriage are among their greatest concerns as New Americans...)
 - c) Our goal was to build shared, positive group identity among Bukharian youth living in America, initially...
 - d) Keeping the teens separate enabled us to gain necessary credibility in the community.
- 2) We were careful to hire culturally competent staff who were (at least) Russian speaking, and who had familiarity with this unique community. Our staff needed to view their work as a two-way learning process, in which staff learn from the teens about their colorful, rich heritage, as well as they learn from us....Their work is not viewed as a one-way process, about us "helping the poor immigrant," but as a mutual one.
- 3) We worked hard to gain the trust of the parents and the key leadership in the community. **CRUCIAL:** We started "where the client was at"... We respected their traditions, such as:
 - a) Observing Kashrut in the lounge
 - b) Respecting Shabbat by not offering any programming then...
 - c) Strictly chaperoning the teens in situations of mixed gender, especially on trips and overnights.
 - d) Inviting key Bukharian rabbis to teach/visit with our teens at the lounge
 - e) Forming a Community Advisory Board of Bukharian leaders, some parents, staff of the "Y," etc. to give us feedback and programmatic suggestions.
 - f) Modest dress by the staff.
- 4) Had to take into account that Bukharian teens had a radically different experience and background from American Jewish teens, and the impact of this experience on their behavior and actions:
 - a) Bukharian teens (unlike American peers) did not attend Jewish sleep away camps, synagogue youth movements (USY, NFTY), never had been on organized summer trips to Israel, were not privileged to have private music, art and SAT

prep. lessons and many are first-generation college bound.....Most had not traveled much outside NYC.

While some teens whom we serve were succeeding academically, others were involved in gangs, drugs, exhibiting anti-social behavior, eager to start fights, and openly hostile (like their parents) towards other ethnic groups, considered not P.C. We actually hired a “security guard” to stand in front of the lounge to prevent fights from breaking out after school between Bukharian and African Americans... And we had a “break-in” by several of our own teens, who were bored and looking for excitement and warmth on a cold, winter night...

- b) Young men act “macho,” sometimes slapping their sisters, to keep them “in line.” What we might regard as abusive behavior, has been, at times, accepted within this culture, including instances of Domestic Violence.
 - c) The need is great for teaching anger management to our teens; we work on conflict resolution and creative problem solving, other than thru physical means...(thru role plays and TFA, as well as talk-groups)
- 5) Finally, in order to develop a successful program, we needed to be the ambassadors to the outside world, on their behalf. Their different, anti-social behavior and cultural nuances had to be explained and interpreted to the surrounding Jewish and general community, including to school personnel, the staff of the Y (who hosted us), rabbis and lay leaders, the police, and neighbors on our street..... We became their advocates and their P-R agents...
- We offered our staff as resources in the high school’s Guidance office, educated the teachers, the local Y’s staff, the police and continually made peace with our neighbors...

D. What were our Programmatic Responses, Intervention and Guiding Principles?

1) We built our program within the framework of Positive Youth Development.

This model emphasizes youth self-determination and helping them develop their own voices in building their futures. Goal is to develop multifaceted programs that help kids grow into mature and successful adults.

Common goals of Positive Youth Development include:

- a) promoting positive peer relationships
- b) connecting youth with caring adults
- c) emphasizing youths’ strengths
- d) empowering youth to assume leadership roles in programs
- e) building competencies thru challenging the youth

2) The Program is a drop-in lounge, open four days/week after school, until the early evening.....In a small space, we pack in a lot of kids and program options.

Ex: Staff have developed a leadership core group, who have been groomed to actively plan programs. A few weeks ago, they created the first Bukharian Idol program, in which their unique talents could shine and which made them feel great! They were also allowed to decorate their own lounge space to be “user friendly” and comfortable for their peers.

Ex: We take a small group (after being trained and prepared) to a Jewish leadership conference, Panim El Panim, in Washington, D.C., where they learn to lobby their own congressman, and see how they can truly make a difference in the world.....

3) We use the “expressive arts” (especially theatre), as ways to enable expression of emotions, inner conflicts and loss that has been experienced by these teens.

We developed Theatre for Action, a technique used by JCCA’s foster care youth, and originating from Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed....

Purpose of TFA: is to create entertaining, provocative theatre that explores difficult truths, uncovers secrets, stimulates dialogue and builds self-esteem.

This interactive theatre technique has successfully helped our teens explore common struggles as immigrants, cope with loss and pain in leaving behind a way of life, and find creative ways to negotiate living in two worlds: of their parents and of their peers.

A dynamic, talented theatre coordinator developed a performance with participating teens, highlighting each kid’s family history and ancestors, unique aspects of their cultural heritage, using authentic music, dance and visuals.....This past year, teens created a home-made video film, about the Bukharians in their neighborhood: the barber, the restaurant owner, the “wise elder” of the community; they also enacted (in role plays) conflictual issues experienced in their own families, including domestic violence.....Performances were held in local synagogues and in the high school, creating greater understanding improving community relations...

In the current (and third) year of this project, TFA has focused on the teens’ “hatred of the other.” We’re treading into more treacherous waters in mixing our teens with Blacks, Hispanics and Asians, with whom they must learn to live. (especially in Queens, one of the most ethnically diverse places in the world) Their parents may not be ready for this openness yet (still fearful) but we feel it’s crucial to help our teens become more open-minded and broader, as part of a multi-cultural society.

4) Provided proactive programmatic responses to the glaring issue of Domestic Violence in this community, and to dealing with the major cultural differences in gender equality.

Counseling, both group and individual is crucial. (must have staff skills)

- a) Trained a social work intern in a Rosh Chodesh curriculum for “girls only,” using Jewish texts to teach and discuss “healthy male-female relationships,” and to explore what are acceptable behaviors between husband and wives, and when are boundaries crossed.

b) Bring in speakers to teach and define what is DV and when and where to ask for help.

5) Use a curriculum of Independent Living Skills, as a basis for programs.

These are practical, hands-on, day-to-day skills that our teens have often missed learning at home, such as: how to navigate the public transportation system; how to save and manage money.

We offer a Summer Internship Program, with placements for 15 to 20 teens, in paid and respectable jobs, such as art museums, government offices, day camps, child care centers, and dr. and dentist offices....with supervision guidance and training on how to dress, how to approach a boss, how to speak on the phone, how to be responsible and communicative... (This also gives our teens exposure to the gamut of opportunity and career choices that are available to them, and a chance to begin building a resume.)

6) We always work towards the “Balance Act” in our programmatic responses

We constantly tread a delicate balance between emphasizing a successful transition as “New Americans” and still holding onto a healthy respect for their parents’ values and their heritage.

Ex: To help with transition as “New Americans,” we offer a college and career preparation series, urging both young men and women to consider college and a career of choice. (This is new for Bukharian young women, who were expected to marry young and bear children)

Similarly, we teach health and sex education, including HIV-AIDS prevention, sexually transmitted diseases, birth control, etc., topics that remain taboo in their homes...

Ex: On other hand, we trained 6 teens as “docents” in the only Bukharian museum in New York, under the supervision of the “wise elder” of their community; and in the process, teens gained a new and deeper appreciation and respect for their own heritage, music, art and culture.

Ex: We have nurtured a girls’ performing dance group, for the past six years, in which young women learned and choreographed Bukharian and Mid-Eastern, hip-hop dances, competing and winning gold awards in the annual Maccabiah games for JCC’s throughout the U.S.

Today, Bukharian dancing remains among the most popular activities at the Teen Lounge.

In appreciation for our vigilance in respecting the Bukharian heritage and traditions, one of the parents recently stood up at a holiday celebration at our Teen Lounge, and proudly thanked JCCA for enabling their kids to continue to love and appreciate who they are.

E. Challenges We Face

a) After 8 years, we continue to face some tough challenges....First, because of our success, we are in need of larger space to accommodate the numbers, and a larger, more diverse staff to respond to the range of teens served. Funding will continue to be a challenge for us, as start-up grants have concluded, and new resources are needed.

b) We are struggling to engage indigenous Bukharian leadership and parents in taking ownership of their youth, and in educating themselves to work with them. Through a new grant from UJA-Federation of New York, called "Partners in Caring," we have begun to offer professional training to the rabbis, who are ill equipped to handle the multiple family problems that are brought to their doorstep and have co-sponsored forums on "healthy parenting" and understanding adolescents, for young parents and community leadership.

c) We are eager to measure outcomes, to track our successes and learn about improving services. We evaluate the program through end-year surveys of all our participants, and have anecdotal evidence of our influence: One of our active participants, Svetlana, went on to college to become President of the Hillel, and while in school, now works as an assistant to an important rabbi in her community. (Mariya, one of our first teens, who then became a staff ass't., is now studying speech therapy thanks to a college scholarship from JCCA, is married and a confident, poised young woman with good public speaking skills)

Longer term impact of the program is more difficult to measure; how will we know that our lounge made the difference in their lives?

The numbers who attend alone attest to the importance and credibility of the program in the community; less Bukharian teens are on the streets! We have recently been approached by leadership to duplicate the program in new areas...

We also know that parents trust us, a significant achievement in itself...Eight years ago, it would have been unheard of for parents to allow their teens to travel with our staff, out of town for camp, a Shabbaton, and for sure, not on a trip to Israel! (as we did)

Conclusion

Our greatest challenge is alluded to in a recently read Torah portion, Emor, which is about Ben –Isha Yisraelit, the paradigm of "the outsider." It reminds us that our community can be a harsh place for anyone who looks out of place, who speaks a different tongue, or whose family structure is not traditional.

In the words of the Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda of Berlin, (the Netziv): "Never underestimate the human potential of the stranger. Never forget that he or she could also be destined for greatness and, hence, never be responsible for the suppression of another's potential. Rather, open your heart to the stranger in love, so that you can enable him to flourish and realize his potential." (from Jewish Week, May 4, 2007)

That is what we strive to do....that is our ultimate challenge.