

# Hillel helps

## Haitian staff inspires yeshiva students to raise funds



Photos courtesy Hillel Yeshiva

Hillel Yeshiva head custodian Pierre Loiseaux, center, a Haitian native, is joined by head of school Dr. Ruth Katz and assistant principal Rabbi Daniel Davis at a Feb. 2 assembly where students presented a \$1,300 check to the Jewish Federation of Greater Monmouth County.

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Students at Hillel Yeshiva in Ocean, who raised \$1,300 for Haitians suffering after last month's devastating earthquake, felt a very personal connection to the tragedy.

After the Jan. 12 quake, the pre-K to eighth-grade school immediately convened a team of students, parents, and administrators and held an emergency assembly to hear custodian Pierre Loiseaux, a Haitian native, talk about the suffering of his own family, some of whom were still missing.

"When we raise the concept of *hesed* [kindness] at our school, we stress it's not only about helping our fellow Jews, but any other human being that is in trouble," said head of school Dr. Ruth Katz. "We were responsive after Hurricane Katrina. This time we gave money in honor of Pierre."

She said that when Loiseaux and the other about 14 Haitian members of the school's custodial staff heard about the students' efforts, their eyes "widened in disbelief that we would launch a whole program for them." Katz said they were told, "You are part of our Hillel Yeshiva family."

Some of the staff lost family members in the disaster, Katz said, but there were some happy endings. The school's middle school custodian, Dume Goudouin, had not heard

anything about his sister and her children, whom he helps support with earnings from a second job.

"I am happy to report that as of about two days ago, he finally spoke to his sister, and she and her children are alive," said Katz on Feb. 12. "Their house is destroyed, of course, but they are alive."

Loiseaux, who has been at Hillel for more than 25 years, said the students' efforts, "make me feel like a 100 million pesos — like a millionaire. I didn't expect it."

He said he lost two cousins in the earthquake and many relatives lost their homes, a point driven home by Katz when Hillel students returned to school Feb. 12 after a two-day hiatus from the snowstorm.

"I told the students they were all safe in their houses during the snowstorm," she said. "Although we were all secure in our houses, imagine they had an earthquake instead of snow and had no place to hide. Imagine if those children couldn't find their favorite doll. Children really relate to the plight of other children."



Hillel Yeshiva students present Federation leaders with the funds they collected for its Haitian relief fund during a Feb. 2 assembly: from left, federation board member Richard Krupnick, sixth-grader Gordon Adelson, assistant federation director of finance Linda Choate, student council president Ricky Tawil, eighth-grader Isaac Gartenberg, federation executive director Howard Gases, and seventh-grader Alan Menaged.

## 'A personal thank you'

During an assembly on Feb. 2, Howard Gases, executive director of the Jewish Federation of Monmouth County, accepted the school's check for its Haitian relief fund. Money donated to federations across North America is being funneled to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which has collected almost \$4 million, and then distributed to partner agencies in Haiti.

As of Feb. 12, the Monmouth federation has raised more than \$10,000 for Haiti.

"It was a pleasure to be part of the Hillel Yeshiva community's partnership with Jewish federation and the Joint Distribution Committee for Haitian relief," said Gases.

Each of the school's 532 children was asked to give a dollar, although some gave more.

Ricky Tawil of Ocean, an eighth-grader and president of the student council, said the governing body called a meeting immediately after learning about the crisis and critical needs from the custodial staff.

"We could see how tragic it was," said Ricky. "We have learned that even though there are no Jewish people in Haiti, because we are all *yahad*, we are all connected, we must help other people no matter what their religion or color."

Ricky had seen just how meaningful the school's *tzedaka* efforts are the previous week when his family went to the Dominican Republic during school vacation. There he met a hotel worker from Haiti who told him about his family's plight. When Ricky told him his school had raised more than \$1,000, the worker was incredulous.

"He really took it personally," said the student leader. "He gave us a personal thank you from himself and his family for raising so much money."

Rabbi Daniel Davis, assistant middle school principal, said the school was "very proud" of the students' role in Operation Haiti.

"They asked questions and were interested in helping not only Pierre and our other custodial staff with relatives in Haiti," he said. "Our student government was able to rise to the occasion and our student body followed."

Katz said the school is also planning a drive for Soles for Souls, which collects shoes for the poor worldwide and has pledged a million pairs to Haiti.