

Program grooms young Jews to be social entrepreneurs

Israel's Presentense fellowship comes to Boston

By Elise Kigner
Advocate Staff

Baillie Aaron spends a lot of time behind bars, and she wants to persuade fellow members of the Jewish community to join her.

Two years ago, Aaron founded a program to teach youth and adult inmates how to launch their own businesses when they get out of prison. Called Entrepreneurship 101, it now boasts more than 100 graduates. One graduate is now taking classes on graphic design, and another is planning to start a yoga studio, she said.

Aaron, who is 24, would like to expand the program by enlisting Jewish business people as teachers and establishing a mentoring program pairing Jewish business owners with youth just released from prison or juvenile detention.

She was one of 13 young Jewish innovators selected for the pilot class of a social entrepreneurship fellowship sponsored by Combined Jewish Philanthropies and Presentense, an Israeli fellowship making its first foray into North America.

The five-month program offers training and coaching in business and leadership skills. It culminates at the end of May, with the fellows pitching their ventures to the local Jewish community in the hopes of receiving funding or offers to merge with existing organizations.

"CJP's big goal is to create a community of innovation and a community that values and supports new ideas and new leaders," said Boston fellowship coordinator

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Baillie Aaron

dinator Elana Boehm.

While participants in the Boston incarnation meet on nights and weekends, the original Presentense Institute in Jerusalem is a six-week residential program. Since 2007, its fellows have launched 41 ventures. Forty seven percent of them have received follow-on funding, Boehm said.

Through one successful venture, Challah for Hunger, student volunteers on more than 30 college campuses bake and sell challah to raise money for humanitarian causes.

A third Presentense fellowship program is set to launch in Tel Aviv in October 2010. Jewish federations in Cleveland and two other locations will be launching Presentense fellowships next year, and are watching the Boston pilot program closely, Boehm said.

The 13 fellows were chosen out of 33 applicants. They had to be within the 22-40 age range and residents of Greater Boston.

Jonathan Shapira, 29, founded the Boston Israel Cleantech Al-

liance, which connects technology investors, entrepreneurs, graduate students and government officials in Israel and Boston and hosts lectures in the Boston area.

Shapira, a business law attorney, said that besides honing his business skills, he hopes the fellowship helps him network with other social entrepreneurs and find mentors in the Jewish community.

Others fellows are coming into the program with only an idea. David Dobin earns his living as a lawyer, while spending his free time developing iPhone and iPod Touch applications. With Presentense, he plans to work on Jewish educational applications.

Alexis Nissenbaum, whose career has been in public relations, plans to create TravelJew, an online database that connects Jewish travelers with Jewish resources in the area they are visiting.

Tova Speter, an art therapist, wants to team Jewish young adults with residents of underserved areas to create murals. Matt Hoffman wants to mobilize young gay Jews in the Boston area to provide resources to gay individuals in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, Aaron is promoting Entrepreneurship 101 as a new outlet for volunteers. "I think the most important thing that the Boston Jewish community will receive from this venture is the ability to help change people's lives in a real and meaningful way," she said.

Volunteers may also receive a surprise. "We ... forget about all the Jewish inmates," Aaron said, noting that two Jews have taken her class.

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