



RAJMN: A bridge between Russian American Jews and our Jewish community

"RAJMN is meaningful to me because it brings our community together. It's people that come from Russian Jewish families like mine, so we all have that similarity," said RAJMN Teen Fellowship participant Sarah Braginsky.

Russian American Jews in Minnesota (RAJMN) is a program for young families, working to connect them to the larger Jewish community in Twin Cities and provide a deeper understanding of Judaism and Russian-Jewish roots. Founded by the St. Paul Jewish Federation in 2003, RAJMN has served 3,000 Russian Americans in the Twin Cities with local programming and opportunities to travel to national and international Jewish conferences.



Sarah Braginsky

Teen Fellowship, which offers high school students the opportunity to explore their understanding of who they are, community and Jewish life, engaged 30 participants this past school year. The students interacted with public figures like writer Ruta Vanagaite and comedian Garik Suharik. "We do a lot of learning about the Russian Jewish experience, where our family came from and why we are in America. I think that's really important to know your roots and where you came from," Braginsky said.

Partnering with Jewish Family Service, the teenagers prepared a program about Hannukah, lighting candles and sharing traditions. "They did a Q and A with the older generation in Russian. It was a joint program where the teenagers shared their Jewish knowledge in a language that was common to them," said founding executive director of RAJMN Ilana Volodarsky. The teens also give back to the community.



The Fellows raised money for Holocaust survivors and war veterans by selling goodie bags with Hamantaschen at a Purim Celebration with Temple of Aaron. "The money that they collected helped to buy dinner for Holocaust survivors without help from outside agencies. The rest of the hamantaschen were donated and delivered to the Jewish Community Center, Jewish Family Services, and Sholom," said Volodarsky.



Ilana Volodarsky

The connections made in RAJMN reach beyond Teen Fellowship, with fellows staying active in different synagogues, summer camps, and Hillel. “Over the course of 18 years it is rewarding to see the kids grow in the program. I get them when they are little when they come to Purim celebrations wearing their costumes. The years go by and they get old enough to participate in the Teen Fellowship program and then when they become students at the U of M campus,” Volodarsky said. “They are still connected to the Jewish community once they move away. I personally give them references when they want to become part of organizations like Moishe House,” she added.

Connecting and volunteering through COVID

During the pandemic, RAJMN is keeping people connected through virtual programs, such as celebrating Jewish holidays together, virtual Yiddish classes and meaningful volunteer opportunities. More than 60 RAJMN participants made and delivered 1,500 masks to Jewish organizations. They also provided lunch to Sholom Hospice staff and donated \$1,000 to local food shelves to help families with no place to shop in the aftermath of George Floyd's killing.



Through support of the St. Paul Jewish Federation, the Genesis Philanthropy Group and the Jewish Federations of North America, RAJMN continues to impact young Russian families in the Twin Cities. Future plans include a trip to Israel next summer – pandemic permitting. “RAJMN is a bridge for Russian Americans to find their comfortable places in the community,” Volodarsky said. “Community engagement and Jewish Education never stops with RAJMN.”

- Michael Stiefel Alperin