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A guiding light

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aliza hausman , THE JERUSALEM POST

Ari Hart was supposed to be at a regular Shabbat meal. Plenty of wine and halla was going around. It was one of his first meals with other 20-something singles in New York City's Washington Heights neighborhood. But the atmosphere quickly changed.

"People were saying racist things about 'the Puerto Ricans' in the neighborhood. I was like, oh man, they're not even Puerto Rican!" Hart said. "There was just so much ignorance and racism."

Hart, 26, became frustrated by how the Orthodox Jewish community interacted with the rest of Washington Heights. "No one I knew actually knew anyone outside the Jewish community. There were very few if any institutional relationships," he said with a frustrated expression, fingering his curly brown hair and adjusting the green tie over his blue-and-white checkered shirt and navy suit.

Hart recently made the *New York Jewish Week's* 2009 list of "36 under 36" Jewish innovators for his social justice work. He co-directs Uri L'Tzedek (ULT), an Orthodox organization changing the way the Orthodox community views social justice activism. Since moving to Washington Heights more than a year ago to attend Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, a Manhattan-based open Orthodox rabbinical school founded by activist Rabbi Avi Weiss, Hart has been altering the neighborhood's status quo.

"In the Latino community, there's a stereotype that Jews keep to themselves," said Carlos Cepeda, a Fresh Youth Initiatives (FYI) group leader. "In Washington Heights, there's a big population of Jewish people and a big population of Dominican people, but they rarely interact."

This chasm was chronicled in *New Voices*, a Jewish student magazine, in 2005. "The separation between YU [Yeshiva University] and the rest of Washington Heights is blatant," said YU sophomore Joshua Balderman. It was a bleak picture, chronicling muggings in the area and a Purim video of Hispanic youths yelling, "YU sucks!" above a caption: "Future Beren Campus security guards."

In this climate, Balderman pursued true cooperation, not just tolerance, because despite "major cultural and language barriers," he believed "work[ing] together these communities could both be affected in a positive way." Eventually he shuttered his YU Community Club due to lack of interest.

WHERE BALDERMAN failed, Hart flourished. His background helps. His interest in community organizing peaked in childhood, when the Biloxi, Mississippi, native bounced between Spanish preschool in Madrid and religious and public schools in the States because of his father's US Air Force job. Hart honed a curiosity for "different people and places, learning how different systems function, how people work together or do not." He discovered "barriers between people aren't as big as people think they are."

By 23, Hart was in Chicago advocating for abused and neglected children with Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA). At 24, he won the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs Nadiv Social Justice Fellowship. The next year, Hart launched Or Tzedek, the Teen Institute for Social Justice, working with teens running the gamut from unaffiliated to Orthodox. His Uri L'Tzedek work earned him the 2008 Herbert Lieberman Award for Community Service at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah.

Uri L'Tzedek's main project is Tav HaYosher, ethical seal in Hebrew, a grassroots initiative bringing workers, owners and community members together to create just workplaces in kosher restaurants. It's a sharp detour from the controversial boycott last year of Agriprocessors, the Iowa slaughterhouse/meat-packaging factory - a move that made ULT infamous in Jewish circles.

Billed as a "social justice movement," ULT is captivating the hearts and minds of Jewish college students and young professionals across the United States. But Hart hasn't forgotten the neighborhood where he has mobilized "the Orthodox community to act beyond narrowly defined self-interest to become partners in the improvement of society."

Hart explained this idea further on the ULT Web site: "[On Pessah,] we are instructed to view ourselves in a position of opportunity and freedom. At the same time, we are to view ourselves as... oppressed... As we enjoy our freedom and many blessings, we must not forget our responsibility... our unique ability to fight for those who are still being enslaved, whether it be by human trafficking, poverty, treatable disease, prejudice, religious persecution or any other form of oppression."

Quoting Martin Luther King, Jr., Hart added: "All too often the religious community has been a taillight instead of a headlight."

Some argue the insular Orthodox community, emphasizing *tzedek* directed mostly internally, has historically been eclipsed by the contributions of the Reform and Conservative movements which have broadly applied Jewish teachings on social justice. Others argue Jewish organizations shouldn't concern themselves with non-Jews. Hart believes "it's very clear in the Torah that we have to look out for the *ger* [the stranger], because we were strangers in a strange land. When there is a stranger in our midst, we have a responsibility to support and protect."

"Jews enjoy a status of privilege in the United States," explained ULT volunteer Ruth Balinsky. "It would be criminal to enjoy [this] without repaying my debt to American society, particularly through working with communities that came here under similar circumstances and have unfortunately not been able to succeed as strongly as the Jewish community. If we do not engage our neighbors in dialogue, then how can we engage other communities?"

To promote dialogue, Hart became a member of the local community board, met with religious leaders and community activists to address common problems and build relationships, and joined Uri L'Tzedek.

LAST YEAR, Hart collaborated with ULT on a clothing drive. "It wasn't just the Jewish community donating clothes to the Dominican community, it was a lot of different groups coming together," Hart said. "We had churches collecting clothes, Jewish people collecting clothes. It wasn't just the Dominican community [that benefited], also the broader community."

Washington Heights is predominately Dominican, but housing prices have brought significant infusions of yuppies escaping lower Manhattan. Hart wanted to bring together all of the community to do something positive. Spearheading the process, he united Alianza Dominicana with other community organizations on local initiatives. ULT helped Alianza Dominicana at a health fair for disadvantaged women. Fort Washington Collegiate Church donated clothing to Alianza Dominicana.

Finally, FYI, which organizes youth for service projects around the community, joined with manpower.

"It was a lot of finding all these groups and becoming the glue linking people together, creating this thing out of all these programs that already existed," Hart said. "The clothing drive itself didn't really matter."

But the clothing drive, meant to alleviate a clothing shortage at a New York psychiatric facility, grew, ultimately succeeding in collecting enough for the facility, three local organizations and one neighborhood woman who had lost her belongings in an apartment fire.

HART DOESN'T gloss over the impact of working with FYI. Last March, ULT joined FYI teens on a clothing drive, the Traveling Clothing Bank. FYI teens collected and then handed clothing out at a neighborhood event. Many of the clothes traveled to the heart of the Dominican Republic. But first, Hart organized a mixer for the mostly Jewish ULT members and the mostly Dominican FYI teens.

"It was a really profound thing. I live in this community. I'm here every day, but I have no interaction with these people. And they're really cool. They want to make the community better and I want to make the community better," Hart said.

"I didn't know what to expect. We come from two different cultures," said Cepeda. "But Ari came across as a really nice guy who's really concerned about young people and community. We had a lot in common. We genuinely care about helping people regardless of what race they might be."

Working with Hart was a meaningful for "his kids," Cepeda noted: "Ari came across as only Ari can. A lot of the kids said, you know, this is the first Jewish person I got to meet and hang out with, and he's a great guy. He broke a lot of those stereotypes."

ULT and FYI partnered again when FYI teens joined Jewish teens from a Queens organization, The Lounge, in community building activities.

"At the core, good people are good people; we all share more in common than differences. We need to know more about each other to break down these stereotypes," Cepeda said. "We had a cultural exchange. They brought typical Jewish cuisine and our kids ate it. We played our music and spent a good half-hour showing each other how to dance. We reached out and got to know each other as human beings." Merengue and gefilte fish definitely alleviate tension.

ULT and FYI reunited to visit an exhibit at the Jewish Museum about Sosua, a community in the Dominican Republic that took in Jews during the Holocaust. Photographs of pasty-faced Jews smiling broadly with dark-skinned Dominican teens on this museum trip (and others around the community) abound on the photo sharing Web site, Flickr.

"Ari and his colleagues were looking for a way to cross [that divide]. He saw that as something that needs to be addressed," Cepeda said. "Regardless if you're Dominican, Jewish, there's one thing we all have in common: we live in this community and this community is ours."

HART IS unsure of his impact.

"My biggest frustration is that I don't know how much I've done. I don't know if the Jewish community has moved any closer to [the rest of the community]," Hart said. "The hardest thing about this work is that you can spend every hour of every day just going and progress is progress, but there are so many forces keeping things the way they are. Sometimes it feels like an unwinnable battle."

But Hart is coordinating tutoring programs with other community organizations, part of the ULT

Youth and Education Initiative which hopes to bring desperately needed tutors to local schools and after-school programs. Five Modern Orthodox tutors currently staff one tutoring program at a local library where they help locals work on conversational English. A school supplies drive recently raised more than \$2,000 for local schools. Next will be launching a neighborhood community service day in the summer and providing more cross-cultural programming at local schools.

"He's deeply committed to improving the local community, passionate about mobilizing the Jewish community to create social change," said ULT volunteer Michal Brickman. "He believes everyone has something to contribute and is constantly encouraging people to become actively involved. Ari brings a tireless enthusiasm for social justice and a deep respect for Torah ideals to the initiatives - and his optimism and positive energy are contagious."

The work is endless. "We're launching a nonprofit, doing visioning, fund-raising, making copies, teaching, organizing, buying food for events, programming and leadership, following up with people, doing a lot of one-on-ones with people, putting stuff together," Hart said. "And then... yeshiva, of course. It's basically two full-time jobs."

Hart struggles with saying no. "I struggle with wanting to do a lot and just not being able to do it all, managing commitments and managing not burning out, following through with everything I want to do. Sometimes there are a million ideas and I can't do it all. I wish I just had a month to process everything that's happened in the last two years."

That break won't come soon. Uri L'Tzedek is working to improve tenants' rights, the local environment, education in surrounding public schools, availability of quality health care and the value of neighborhood apartments in Washington Heights, all to enhance the lives of everyone in the community by providing a cleaner, safer, friendlier neighborhood.

Hart has made Washington Heights a smaller place and he'll continue working to keep it that way. Today, local churches, synagogues and other organizations that once ignored each other, call on each other as friends.

"In a thousand years from now, it won't matter what house I have or the car I drive or how much money I have in the bank," Cepeda said. "All that's going to matter is the difference I made in my community. That's the message Ari and his organization live by."

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