

A "Stuyvie" Reminisces

By Chaim Goldberg

Stuyvesant High School has long been regarded as the jewel in the crown of the New York City public school system, famous for its strong representation in such high-profile competitions as the Intel Science Talent Search. Stuyvesant (just a fifteen-minute walk from the offices of the Orthodox Union in downtown Manhattan) was the first to be recognized by the President's Commission on Excellence as one of the best schools in the country. The average SAT score at the school is over 1400, and its students frequently end up competing against each other for placement in the nation's finest universities.

However, there is something special about the school that the staff and most of the alumni are not aware of.

During the 1990s, scores of otherwise unaffiliated Jewish youth at Stuyvesant reestablished their connec-

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Dr. David Luchins, a vice president of the OU and former senior advisor to the late US Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, addresses club members in a Senate chamber during the 1994 Washington, DC, Shabbaton. (Rabbi Jeffrey Greenberg, director of New York NCSY, is seated in the background.)

tion to Klal Yisrael through the Jewish Culture Club. The JCC at Stuyvesant, sponsored by New York NCSY

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(National Conference of Synagogue Youth), saw some amazing results.

Believing Stuyvesant's fertile intellectual soil was ideal for sowing the

seeds of Torah-true Judaism, New York NCSY assigned Rabbi Nisan Gertz, an inspiring twenty-something *kiruv* professional, to the Stuyvesant club. Every Tuesday afternoon after school, JCC members would meet with the outgoing and scholarly rabbi. (Although the club was officially only an hour long, we members usually ended up staying for at least two hours, kicking around ideas.) The JCC and "Nissy," as he was known to

club members, were a perfect *shidduch*. Nissy offered *da'at Torah* in a forthcoming, confident and non-judgemental manner. Week in and week out, he showed us that the Torah really does have the answers to the issues we confronted. During the evenings, Nissy would spend hours on the phone offering advice and *chizuk* to help us work through our individual challenges. In time, the club earned a reputation for being both cutting-edge and entertaining, often causing attendance to exceed fifty in a classroom designed to hold thirty.

How did the JCC become so successful? First, Nissy would draw stu-

dents by using provocative titles for club meetings such as “The Legacy of the Jewish King from Bethlehem” (referring to David Hamelech, of course) and “Euthenasia: Mercy Killing or Murder?”

Jew and Gentile alike (yes, there were several members who were not of the Jewish faith) left every meeting with a sense of camaraderie. Then there was the food. Oh yes. Second factor. The *kiruv* movement has seen astronomic growth—often achieved through gastronomic growth.

Shabbatonim were another major draw. New York NCSY arranged for special *Shabbatonim* and trips including an excursion to Washington, DC, exclusive to “Stuyvies” and their friends. Club members took a tour of the Capitol, were introduced to the top-ranking Orthodox Jew in the military at the time, and enjoyed the “Jewish hos-

American Museum of Natural History. We shared in Leo’s *pidyon haben* (which took place during a club meeting with fellow club member Yosef HaCohen Katz) and taught our non-Jewish class-

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mates about Yom HaShoah by passing out yellow Magen Davids marked with the word “Jude,” all the while growing closer to each other and to Judaism.

Many club members ended up

mately becoming one of the *metzuyan-im* of the Mir Yeshiva *kollel* in Yerushalayim (and undoubtedly left someone in the admissions office in Cambridge scratching his head). Two club members went to Neve Yerushalayim College in Jerusalem, where they strengthened their commitment to Torah before continuing on to Stern College for Women. In truth, deciding to defer college in order to further our Jewish education was the proper application of the Stuyvesant school motto, “*Pro scientia atque sapientia*” (For knowledge and wisdom).

Recently, my wife and I, who met as club members in 1994, arranged a ten-year club reunion. On a Sunday afternoon, about twenty men and women and their families from across the New York area showed up at Dougies Restaurant in Brooklyn to eat Buffalo wings and reminisce. During our reunion, we reaffirmed our still-strong connection. Today, members of our group are computer programmers, psychologists and graduate and *kollel* students. Not one of the Jewish members married outside the faith.

At the end of the evening, I reminded club members of a *mishnah* in *Avot* that I quoted in the 1995 New York NCSY yearbook. Rabbi Yochanan Hasandler says, “Any assembly whose purpose is for the sake of Heaven will eventually endure, and any assembly whose purpose is not for the sake of Heaven will not endure.” I asked club members to judge for themselves if this *berachah* was, and maybe continues to be, fulfilled by our group.

Unfortunately, due to changes in the security policy of the school (located five minutes away from Ground Zero), NCSY is no longer able to sponsor the Stuyvesant club. NCSY has over one hundred public high school clubs across North America. To support this effort, please call Rabbi David Felsenthal at 973-818-2484. (JA)



Havdalah after a fall 1995 club Shabbaton at Rabbi Nisan “Nissy” Gertz’s apartment in Kew Gardens Hills, New York. (The author is pictured second from the left.)

pitality” of the NCSY chapter in Silver Spring, Maryland.

The club’s electricity alone drew many of us to Torah-true Judaism. Club members put tefillin on fellow classmates who had never worn them before, shared fears and advice with each other regarding growing in religious observance, held Sunday barbecues and took *motzei Shabbat* excursions to the

turning down the finest universities in the nation, including Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Boston University, Brandeis, New York University and other esteemed institutions of higher learning in order to engage in some genuine “higher learning.” Some of us went to study at Ohr Somayach or Kol Yaakov in Monsey, New York. One member deferred Harvard for a few years, ulti-