Foundation, Federation join forces to raise more money for disaster relief

JANET PEREZ | MANAGING EDITOR

With an autumn filled with deadly hurricanes, earthquakes and wildfires, the Jewish Federations of North America’s (JFNA) disaster relief campaign has gone into overdrive to provide help to Jewish and non-Jewish communities hit hard by nature’s fury.

JFNA depends on its member federations to contribute to the disaster relief fund and the Jewish Federation of Greater Phoenix has answered the call by raising $20,000. Now there is an opportunity to triple that amount.

The Jewish Community Foundation of Greater Phoenix (JCF) has announced it will provide a dollar-for-dollar match of up to $20,000 for any additional disaster relief funds raised by the Federation through Oct. 18.

Marty Haberer, executive director of the Jewish Federation of Greater Phoenix, said he hopes that the Foundation’s donation match will result in a total $60,000 contribution to the JFNA’s relief fund. Still, Haberer is proud of what the Valley’s Jewish community has donated so far.

“As part of their sentencing, Holocaust survivor Oskar Knoblauch met with the three teens arrested for vandalizing a Chandler family’s menorah last December.”

JEFF KRONENFELD | STAFF WRITER

When Holocaust survivor Oskar Knoblauch received a phone call from the Maricopa County Attorney’s Office asking him to meet with the perpetrators of an anti-Semitic act of vandalism, he didn’t hesitate.

“I’m a hawk on giving people a second chance, because a second chance was given to me during the Holocaust,” Knoblauch said.

As part of their sentencing, Holocaust survivor Oskar Knoblauch met with the three teens arrested for vandalizing a Chandler family’s menorah last December.

Celebrating Sukkot

Yeshiva High School of Arizona students, left, joined hundreds of others at synagogues and organizations across the Valley in building Sukkahs to observe Sukkot. For more photos of Sukkot celebrations, go to Page 20.

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Last December, a large decorative menorah in the front yard of the Ellis family’s home in Chandler was twisted into a swastika. In March, police arrested four people, one adult and three juveniles, in the incident.

In August, the juveniles pleaded guilty and were sentenced to perform 30 hours of community service, write a letter of apology to the victims and pay restitution. Additionally, each of the teens had to meet face-to-face with a Holocaust survivor and then write a 10-page essay on the lessons learned from the Holocaust and how their actions impacted the community.

“The prosecutor said, ‘We’re trying to find a way to substitute punishment with education,’” Knoblauch said.

After hearing that, Knoblauch had only one question: “Who do I see first?”

The case garnered national and international headlines as yet another example of rising intolerance and anti-Semitism across the nation. But the incident also became an example of a community coming together and refusing to let ignorance and hate control the narrative.

Before the arrests and sentencing and community support that followed, the Ellis family had to face the fear and uncertainty of having a holiday decoration perverted into a symbol of hate.

“It was just really hard,” Naomi Ellis said. “Why did this happen? Why would somebody do this? Should we be scared or is it just kids? We dealt with a lot of confusion and sadness.”

On the morning of Dec. 30, with the help of a responding police officer, Ellis hastily disassembled the crudely shaped swastika before her children saw it.

That evening, the Ellis family was in for another surprise. Fellow congregants from Temple Emmanuel of Tempe, neighbors and others joined together to rededicate the repaired menorah. The crowd of about 200 people was matched by the support from the community caused us to take a step back,” Montgomery added.

“”Their utter failure to appreciate the ripple effect that action had within the community caused us to take a step back,” Montgomery added.

Part of that step back involved Montgomery’s office contacting the Ellis family.

“The [assistant county attorney] called us and was like, ‘This isn’t a typical case.’ There are a lot of interesting circumstances and because they were juveniles, juvenile courts really focus on rehabilitation,” Ellis said. “He wanted [the teens] to learn and to understand what they had done so that they feel the impact. So he came up with this very wonderful plan.”

But finding a Holocaust survivor willing to meet with the perpetrators individually was the linchpin of the deal. When the county attorney’s office reached out to the Phoenix Holocaust Survivors’ Association, they were put in touch with Knoblauch.

While Knoblauch was sympathetic to the Ellis family and the county attorney’s desired outcome, he was skeptical of the perpetrators’ claims of ignorance, especially when he learned one of them actually had a Jewish background.

“He had a grandfather who was Jewish,” Knoblauch said. “I questioned him because he said that they did not know what the menorah was. I said, ‘How could you not know that?’”

When the boy explained his father was not practicing and hadn’t taught him about his background, Knoblauch still refused to let the boy off the hook.

“Forget about the menorah. You and your compadres committed a crime, you trespassed somebody’s private property and you destroyed some of that property,” Knoblauch said he told the teen. “I don’t care what it was, it could have been just a little statue, but you destroyed it, you made it look like something else, so that’s a crime and you need to be responsible for that.”

After meeting with each of the three juveniles and their families for several hours, reading their essays and apology letters and witnessing their community service, Knoblauch is convinced they are not only truly remorseful, but that the proper balance between punishment and rehabilitation was struck.

“I think that they participated willingly in talking to me,” Knoblauch said. “The courts were wise to do that.”

The adult’s case is still being adjudicated, but he will likely receive a similar sentence, said Knoblauch, who was contacted by the county attorney’s office to plan a meeting.

Knoblauch reiterated the importance of education in fighting hate, noting the value of education.

“When we Hebrews started our calendar 5,778 years ago,” Knoblauch said. “We’ve been around for a while. You know why? Because we said to ourselves that the only way you’re going survive in this world is with education. The power is not in your fists; it is up here, in your mind. Learn to become a programmer of your own computer, which means, pack as much education as you can into your brain and you will have a wonderful life.”

“I said, ‘I’m giving you guys a secret that we Jews know,’” Knoblauch added.

“It’s not that we’re rich or powerful, but because we get ourselves an education, and you can too’ — which is so much better than sending them to a juvie, isn’t it?” JN