

Launching a lifetime of giving

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Hannah Davis, 17, Danielle Leboff, 12, and Andrew Richler, 17, look over philanthropy program pamphlet for the U.J.A.'s.

STUART LAIDLAW/TORONTO STAR

Danielle Leboff is just 12, but she's already looking to adulthood and the responsibilities that come with it – and topping the list is making the world a better place.

She is, however, still a child and her approach to this new sense of duty reflects that.

"Every kid should be able to do things that are fun," says Danielle, sitting in her comfortable North Toronto home.

So, in a few months, when she has her bat mitzvah, Danielle will use the traditional Jewish ceremony marking a young person's ascent into adulthood to help those less fortunate than herself.

She will take all the money she receives as gifts and set up her own charitable trust to help the less fortunate. It's part of a program begun in Toronto five years ago by the United Jewish Appeal to introduce young people to a life of philanthropy.

"These are our future leaders, and this is our investment in them," the UJA's Angela D'Aversa says of the the B'nai Tzedek Youth Philanthropy program. "It's not just about the money."

So far, D'Aversa says, more than 100 such funds have been created, with a total of \$580,000. The funds each earn a 3.5 per cent interest payout, which the teens can give to any charity they want. That's more than \$20,000 a year going to the charities. The size of each fund depends on the fortunes of the families involved, D'Aversa says, but the minimum amount is \$1,000.

Danielle wants to set up a charity to pay the fees so children of Ethiopian Jewish families can take dance classes. Dance classes, she says, can help the newcomers participate in an activity that many Canadian-born children take for granted. That, she says, will let them feel more at home here and so make the transition easier for the entire family.

"I've always loved dance, and I think they will, too," says Danielle.

Sitting nearby, her mother, Lianne Leboff, smiles proudly.

"We raised them to always give something back," Leboff says of Danielle and her twin sister Rachel.

Rachel is taking a similar initiative to help pay the way for lower income children to attend summer camp.

Hannah Davis, one of the first teens to take part in the program, says setting up a charitable trust changed her life – though, at the time, her parents had to talk her into it. "I wanted instant gratification," says Davis, now 17.

Although she was willing to donate to charity, the approach of setting up a charitable trust didn't appeal to her. Instead, she wanted to give away all the money in the first year and get a big reaction. She's glad now that she opted for longer-term philanthropy.

"The essence of me has been changed with this program," says Davis, who as student co-chair of the program now recruits others to take part when their bar or bat mitzvahs come along.

"The feeling I have from giving money away – I would never have had that without this program."

Seventeen-year-old Andrew Richler, Davis's co-chair, says having a charitable fund has opened his eyes to those in need and to ways to help. In the past, he has helped under-privileged kids go to camp.

But this year he is switching his annual giving to the elderly, after two events shook his understanding of aging.

He took part in the annual March of the Living, in which teens visit the Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camp sites in Poland. As well, a relative was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

This year, he will donate his money to Circle of Care, which works with aging Holocaust survivors.