

And The Winner Is...

A volunteering competition is currently underway among MASA participants, with the winners of each of the three competition categories - volunteering program, group volunteering initiative and individual volunteering initiative - to be announced during MASA's end-of-year mega event in May / Natalie Page



Despite the threat of missiles, members of MASA's Otzma program volunteered in Ashkelon, working with children and the elderly

Israel must be the only country in the developed world fortunate enough to enjoy a constant influx of volunteers from abroad, who wish to improve the lives of the country's more disadvantaged citizens. This is indeed the case with this year's more than 8,200 gap year, undergraduate and postgraduate Diaspora Jews who are currently participating on one of MASA's 160 long-term Israel programs.

Supported by the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency for Israel, MASA was established in 2003 with the aim of enabling thousands of Jewish youth to spend a semester or a year in Israel, helping them build a life-long relationship with Israel and a firm commitment to Jewish life. In addition to learning Hebrew and embarking on their own personalized version of the "Israeli experience," all participants also leave their mark on the communities in which they are embedded. Some help students with their English, others volunteer in old-age homes, absorption centers and various non-profit organizations.

Mega event

Wishing to acknowledge the important and valuable contribution of its participants to Israeli society, the various volunteering initiatives will receive center stage at MASA's upcoming mega end-of-year celebration in Tel Aviv's Frederic R. Mann Auditorium on May 19th, where there will be an estimated 2,500 attendees. The evening's host will be Sha'anun Streett, lead singer of the Israeli hip hop funk group Hadag Nachash ("the fish snake") and an active volunteer in his own right.

A volunteering competition is currently underway among MASA participants and the winners of each of the three competi-

tion categories will be announced during the end-of-year event. The winners will have the privilege of being called up to the stage and the Israeli Prime Minister has been invited to award them certificates of acknowledgment in person. The panel of judges will be comprised of senior government and Jewish Agency officials, and they will be looking for volunteering stories that stand out with respect to their impact and added value. In recognition of Tel Aviv-Yafo's 100 year anniversary, the organizers plan to include representatives of the municipality on the panel of judges.

Volunteering program

One of the contenders in the competition's volunteering program category is the Otzma ("strength") post-graduate leadership program. Suzanne Hayman, age 22, from Baltimore, Maryland, is just one of this year's 50 college graduates filled with a desire to give to others who joined Otzma. After spending three months learning Hebrew and volunteering in a center for at-risk teens and an Ethiopian daycare center in Be'er Sheva, Suzanne was supposed to spend the next three months volunteering in her 'Partnership 2000' sister city, Ashkelon, with four of her peers. But then Operation Cast Lead began.

"During the war, they stationed us in Carmiel, because they were worried about us being in Ashkelon, which was being bombarded with rockets," recalls Hayman. There, Suzanne found herself volunteering for two weeks in the Sarel army program, followed by two weeks helping out in a soup kitchen and a special needs center. "When Operation Cast Lead ended, we got the OK to go back, and I was really worried because you hear and read horror stories about the large number of rock-



While in Israel on a MASA program, Alexis Spinoza opened a dance class for at-risk youth

ets that were hitting the Negev, and I talked to Israeli friends in the south, who all told me not to come," recounts Hayman. "The Otzma organizers sat us down, because they were worried about the way we felt about going to volunteer in Ashkelon. They left it up to us to decide if we wanted to go to Ashkelon or continue volunteering in Carmiel. After talking about our concerns and our feelings, we decided to give Ashkelon a try," says Hayman.

Since the city was still being shelled and they were risking their safety (and their parents' sanity!) in order to volunteer, which can be done in safer locations in Israel, their decision was not a trivial one. And, indeed, they