

Building community: one step at a time

Even when she's not running endurance triathlons to raise money for cancer research — something

she does often — Terri Sundsvold is

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hard to keep up with. From founding and co-organizing Jconnect Seattle's Jewish Learning Initiative program, to serving on the Congregation Beth Shalom membership committee, her behind-the-scenes work in the local Jewish community affects countless people. This month, however, Terri will be subletting her apartment, delegating her responsibilities, and heading south for an as-yet-undetermined period of time to do Katrina relief work in New Orleans.

Terri volunteered for her synagogue's membership committee as soon as she became a member. Her role on the committee? To bring in the 20-30-year-old Jewish community, which she accomplishes by collaborating with Jconnect Seattle on the popular ThirdFriday Kabbalat Shabbat program. But it still has a way to go, Terri believes.

"I think it is a fantastic program that has a lot more potential than it is

actualizing at this point," she says.

Along with her crossover duties however, Terri is involved with Jconnect on other levels, most notably in Jewish learning. The JLI involves a rotating series of educational opportunities for young adults as well as general enrichment classes.

"We bring teachers from all elements of the community, Terri says. "Right now, we are offering an interfaith couples class, as well as Hebrew, ethics and Jewish oriented crafts, like the mosaic menorah class I am teaching.

"It started when I had my adult Bat Mitzvah through Jconnect in 2004," she says. "A group of us received support through Hillel at the University of Washington, and based on our experience, I approached [Jconnect director Josh Miller] and told him we needed more learning opportunities and in a different format."

Terri took on the volunteer position of running the program with Miller at the beginning of 2005. She devotes endless hours to finding teachers, publicizing and coordinating the different classes and keeping the program running.

"I think it builds community, which is very important to me," she says. "I also think that creating a non-intimidating environment, that doesn't require much commitment, allows people to experience Jewish learning who otherwise wouldn't."

"Terri is one of the most committed volunteer leaders working with Jconnect Seattle," says Miller. "We are going to



Terri Sundsvold gets her baggage ready for her extended trip to the New Orleans area.

was located close to the eye of the storm. After severe winds leveled all the buildings, tidal surges came up and flooded the land as well.

"The area is pretty devastated," she says. Terri worked with non-profit organization World Shelters building single-family temporary shelters for those in need.

"During Sukkot, I was living in a tent in disaster-land," she says happily. The shelters were built of tarp and PVC — no problem for Terri. It turns out that while the scientist / athlete / community-builder may look at home in a white lab coat, she is equally adept with a Skilsaw.

"I blame my skills on growing up in a do-it-yourself house," she says. "My father does carpentry and my mother is a seamstress. When we wanted or needed something in my house, we made it."

Terri says her experience in Mississippi was a powerful one on a variety of levels.

"It is an interesting experience to work with people, on their property, and talk to them while you help them build a shelter," she says. "You hear their stories and learn about them. I think it was particularly challenging coming from the liberal Pacific Northwest. You don't always agree with the people you are helping. Some of them were pretty outspoken and you have to just remind

yourself that you are there to help people out, not to judge their ideologies."

Terri had her realization while

davening in her tent.

"I have a regular prayer and Torah-reading practice," she says, "I realized as I was davening that I needed to find a way to come back there. I understood that more than most people, I had the freedom to go, the desire to help, and the skills to be useful."

She returned to Seattle to sublet her apartment and delegate her array of Jewish community responsibilities. She'll be off for New Orleans after the New Year, ready to build.

"I honestly believe that building strong community is the most basic, grassroots way we can heal the world," she says. "All the activities I choose to participate in are fundamentally rooted in my belief system and worldview.... Building community is one of the most important things you can do."

TRENDSETTER CLOSE-UP:

Name and Age:
Terri Janelle Sundsvold, 27
Favorite Jewish hangout:
 Post-Shabbat dinner,
 wherever she happens to be
Work: Most recently in cancer
 research at Fred Hutchinson
 Cancer Research Center at
 the University of Washington.
 Currently unemployed
Favorite Vacation Spot:
 Somewhere new
Favorite night-on-the-town:
 Drinking wine with good
 friends
What she's reading: The
 Autograph Man by Zadie
 Smith
Favorite Quote: "You can't give
 what you don't have."