

By Heidi J. Gleit

THERE is a growing trend in academia to increase community involvement among students in order to promote social justice and human rights. At the forefront of the trend in Israel is the Human Rights Fellows program of the Minerva Center for Human Rights at the Hebrew University's Faculty of Law, which has come to serve as a paradigm for universities and colleges throughout the country.

Social

"Israel's Council for Higher Education recently approved funding for a national program to encourage student involvement that is based on the Human Rights Fellows model," says Dr. Daphna Golan-Agnon who founded the Fellows program in 1998 and serves as its director. Moreover, in 2005 the Faculty of Law launched a national forum, the Academy-Community Partnership for Social Change, which supports similar programs at institutes of higher education throughout the country, with 10 courses operating to date.

"We want to connect what students learn at the University to the real world and use the resources of academia to address social problems. In a city like Jerusalem, which has a high poverty rate and many social problems, it is almost an imperative," says Golan-Agnon, who has held key positions in several human rights organizations and has conducted research on how to improve the efficacy of students' community involvement initiatives.

"Our mandate extends far beyond the Faculty of Law," says Dr. Yuval Shany, Minerva Center academic director and incumbent of the Hersch Lauterpacht Chair in Public International Law. "We want students from all disciplines to participate in and benefit from the program. While Minerva is mainly research-oriented, the Human Rights Fellows program is a bridge that connects our theoretical work to the practical and connects us to the community," he says, noting that the Center also runs training programs on human rights and fighting discrimination for teachers working in the Jewish and Arab education sectors.

Each year, 15 outstanding students — Jewish and Arab — with a proven interest in human rights are selected to

participate in the Human Rights Fellows program, with their stipends funded by the Ford Foundation. The program comprises an introductory course on human rights and an internship at a nonprofit organization. The introductory course has two components, says Golan-Agnon: "First, the students divide into small groups to discuss all aspects of their internships, from their status in the organization to whether they agree with its policies. In the second half of each session, I teach about human rights, legal instruments, and their impact on society.

was already active in various social and educational projects," she says, adding that she hopes to use her education to heal the rifts between different sectors of the population.

Rotem Zamir, who is completing a master's in philosophy at Tel Aviv University and a master's in clinical psychology at the Hebrew University, was selected for the Fellows program in the 2006/7 academic year and is currently interning with the Defense for Children International advocacy organization. She has spent much of her academic career searching for a way to connect her studies to her many social activism

From front: Aswan <<
Zoabi, Dr. Daphna
Golan-Agnon, Rotem
Zamir, Dr. Yuval
Shany and Zvika Orr

Connections

"The students participate in the program during a very meaningful period of their lives and find it empowering. It is rewarding to encounter energetic, idealistic students who are drawn to social activism." Indeed, in direct response to student demand, Golan-Agnon's introductory course was expanded in 2006 to include 45 students involved in other Hebrew University intern projects in the nonprofit sector, such as an educational outreach program with rape crisis centers in Jerusalem.

ASWAN Zoabi, an alumna of the Human Rights Fellows program who interned with the Ma'ayan Hahinuch Hademokrati (Wellspring for Democratic Education)

grassroots community education organization in 2004, has a master's degree in the sociology of education and she is now completing a master's degree in philosophy.

Zoabi leads the discussion group for Arab students taking the human rights introductory course who are interning in Issawiyeh, a village adjacent to the University's Mount Scopus campus. "It is a fascinating group which includes six law students who intern at a nonprofit law clinic for at-risk youth as well as students from sociology, education and other disciplines who teach leadership skills at a youth center," she says.

For Zoabi, who grew up in Nazareth, the Fellows program is an "agent for change". Indeed, in participating in it, she feels that she acted as a bridge between the local community and the University. "I wanted to be part of the University's outreach to the community, in particular to the Arab community where I

initiatives. The program helps her "put everything in context," she says. "It challenges you to grow intellectually. It's a very powerful process."

Zamir notes that while many of the nonprofits where she volunteers have no contact with other organizations doing similar work, the program itself — in bringing together students who come from diverse interests and academic backgrounds — is creating a network of activists with the potential to increase cooperation.

Indeed, the network is already active, says Golan-Agnon, with many alumni of the program now working for nonprofits, pursuing studies in related areas or bringing increased sensitivity to human rights to their careers and activities.

Anthropology student Zvika Orr, who participated in the Fellows program in 2002, is currently writing his master's degree thesis on organizations that promote socioeconomic rights in Israel.

Orr interned with the Yedid Association for Community Empowerment, subsequently worked for Yedid for several years before returning to his studies and continues to volunteer there today.

His interest in human rights was sparked by the concept of "the vulnerability of humanity" which, combined with his belief in the potential for systemic change, led to his applying to the Human Rights Fellows program. "I began studying human rights through my courses in sociology and anthropology," he says. "The Fellows program was a refreshing opportunity to examine human rights in a comprehensive and innovative manner." ■

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