

Our Hero's Journey, as told by the Education Director  
Your Learner who has shown significant growth or change:

Name

JB

Age

14

What is special about your learner? What makes him interesting?

JB began Limud when he was in third grade, one of three students in the school. As the school grew, he remained very much in the background, refusing to participate in any experiential learning. He would not sing during tefilah, barely participated in any hands on art activities such as making ritual tiles, would not respond in class and was in general sulky. He was not a student I would ever have projected to remain after his bar mitzvah, no less become a leader in our Limud High program.

What makes him interesting is his metamorphosis from reluctant learner, someone who always felt he had to make a negative comment to get attention to a serious learner, who has been empowered to not only become an active member of our school, but someone who is now applying the values he has learned at Limud into his daily life.

Who is his mentor?

I (Fredda Klopfer) have been JB's mentor, although that has only become apparent in the past two years. I had been, up until this year, the volunteer principal of Limud. This year I remained active as part of the PLT.

What is the model?

The two aspects of the model which I feel impacted JB were non-judgmental listening and empowering him through that listening to make decisions.

### **Learner's Journey**

#### **Ordinary World**

JB goes to a prestigious private school which he has attended since kindergarten. In school, he has been a reluctant learner and has not lived up to his potential. As a former special education teacher, and retired elementary principal, I accompanied JB's parents to school to request he be evaluated and then went again for the results. JB is a bright student who for various reasons is not performing as would be expected of someone of his intellectual level.

JB plays intra scholastic tennis and enjoys fishing. He finds homework a challenge and is tutored almost daily in an attempt to improve this situation. He questions how much of what he studies is useful which is reflected in his lack of focus on his schoolwork.

## Call to Adventure and Meeting the Mentor

My journey with JB really began to flourish under very unusual circumstances. During the school year 2011-12, I developed a condition which required me to take prednisone which lowered my resistance. As a result, I could not attend Limud for the first several months. After a few weeks, I received an email from JB stating he missed me (an unusual sentiment for him), and would I please call him. What followed, during the three months I was out, were weekly phone calls, and frequent email updates which revolved around what was happening in his life. This afforded me the opportunity to gain a window into his daily life which I would not have had. It broke down the wall that JB usually sets up between himself and the adults in his life. What enticed JB to become more positive toward Limud was our practice of active listening. During the year, I would periodically ask students for their input, and would give them a questionnaire at the end of the year asking about positive experiences and suggestions for the future. Two years ago JB, who loves to eat, suggested we give breakfast on Sunday mornings. Our musical tefilah, to which students and parents come, begins at 9:30. JB suggested we give breakfast from 9-9:30. We implemented this last year and it has been very successful. This, I believe, was the trigger for JB to feel free to offer suggestions, sometimes ones just to get my attention, but sometimes ones that were valid. He began to realize that we take students seriously.

JB continued this year into our Limud High program. This is our post bar/bat mitzvah program which consists of students being a madrich in a classroom for an hour, and studying for an hour. A major gift this year was more than symbolic. A family in our synagogue is very involved in the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous. They wanted their granddaughter who had become a bat mitzvah in June to attend the annual dinner at the Waldorf Astoria where a rescuer is reunited with the person who was rescued. So she would not be the only middle school student present, we were told we could invite eight students to attend along with the clergy, and me. The students were so touched by this that they decided to honor this experience by creating a Yom HaShoah service. Jeremy, along with the other Limud High students created a black and white globe out of papier mache with dots of color sprinkled over the surface. This represented that the world was a dark place during the Holocaust, but there were people, like the rescuers who supplied rays of light during a dark period of time. Each student then took on the persona of one of the rescuers described in the book which the students received at the dinner, and told their story.

Also present was a WWII veteran in his nineties who had helped to liberate Dachau. Jeremy interviewed him at the service and encouraged him to tell his story. This was a very poignant moment.

A congregant who is a gifted teacher volunteered to steer the project along with the Limud High teacher. This solidified JB's realization that we were empowering students to create their

own learning, and we would supply the resources to make sure it happened. The dinner was the tangible gift, the sense of empowerment the symbolic one.

### Crossing the Threshold

The “special world” of JB’s, Limud and the synagogue, is much different from his ordinary world, secular school, family and community, just by the fact that his day school is predominately non-Jewish. The community in which Jeremy lives has very few Jews. In addition, his father is Jewish, but his mother is from Asia so the “ordinary world” presents a cultural clash which he does not have to deal with at Limud.

At Limud he is accepted and respected for who he is. JB has discovered he does not have to hide his intelligence here and that his ideas and input are valued. Here he is also part of a small group of peers who share his values and appreciate his wit and out of the box remarks. I think the main thing that has inspired him in his “special world” is knowing his ideas are not only appreciated but that they are listened to and considered seriously. , He is empowered to explore his ideas and make things happen.

### The Struggle

The struggle for JB has been to emerge from his cynical, self-deprecating image, which caused him to hide in the background. One way he has done this is through the tremendous pride he has shown in his Hebrew tutoring. He told me that he found the key to successfully working with a child is to begin by getting to know the student as a person...likes, dislikes, hobbies etc. His goal is to have them feel as he does that the synagogue is their second home. What JB has done is to call upon his own background to discover what works and what does not. The teacher (name the teacher) in the classroom with whom he works enabled him to do this, by giving him the freedom to work with a student while being supervised in a way that empowered him to do things in way in which he felt comfortable.

### The Treasure

We have a song that ends our musical tefilah which is a rewrite of the song. “Family Tree” by Tom Chapin. The chorus is “We’re a family here at CTI, our roots go down, our branches reach the sky, with so many people reaching out to me, we are a green and growing Family Tree.” Each year, when we debriefed, JB would let me know that he detested the song. When I met with him to talk about his being our “hero” he told me that he was so proud that he was one of three students at Limud five years ago, and now there are sixty students. “I feel like Sydney, Andrew and me, are the trunk of the tree, and that all the students who have come since are the branches and leaves....just like our Family Tree.” When I reminded him that he had always told me that he despises the song he replied, “Yeah I don’t like the song but I love the image...we are a growing Family Tree and the three of us are the center of that tree.” Wow quite a statement from someone who had sat in the shadows!!

JB clearly feels like an integral part of the school, its values and our strong emphasis on building community. He began his journey as a follower and has emerged as a strong and confident leader...someone who now knows he has much to offer and that his gifts are treasured.

### The Road Back

I think the biggest measure of the success of our school is “the road back”, the way the learner integrates what he has learned at Limud into his life. JB gave me several examples of this. Our school emphasizes being kind, and our rabbi often cites as an example the simple act of saying hello. JB told me that he now does this in the school hallways, walking through a supermarket or down the street. His friends have noticed this, and some are following suit. JB remarked that if you say something positive you get something back...sometimes it is a smile, and sometimes a conversation.

Another value JB has learned that he is bringing into his life is our emphasis on not only saying the misheberach, but calling someone who is ill and telling them you are thinking of them. His neighbor’s cat had been ill. JB told the owner that he wished his cat a “refua shlema” (he explained what that meant). Unfortunately the cat died, but when it did JB was there to express condolences. Several weeks later, when JB lost his dog, the neighbor returned the kindness.

I mentioned one Sunday that I knew we have many talented musicians, and it would be wonderful if some of them could perform for our Israel Celebration. When I got home that day, I got an email from JB to call him. He told me he would like to organize a small band to play. He proceeded to find students who wanted to participate, set up rehearsal schedules on Sundays (always checking with me first about time), and met with the rabbi to discuss appropriate music. When a member of the band was not showing up, he called me to tell me of his frustration, but not to worry, he would take care of it.

Though they are starting with three musicians, the band hopes to expand this effort next year. As I walked around Limud recently I heard the sweetest music coming from a room...it was JB on trumpet and another student on flute practicing the Hatikvah. I thought to myself, not only are they playing Hatikvah, they are Hatikvah-the hope.

**PS** As a Postscript I would like to add, that when I told JB that we had chosen him for our Hero’s Journey he was very honored. He was a bit disappointed that he could not attend Yachdav. I suggested instead that he attend the June Board of Trustees meeting where he could address the Board on what his journey at Limud has meant to him. A year ago, this suggestion would have met with an emphatic, “No Way!” This year the response was, “It would be my honor.”