

The punk, the payot and the payoff

Entrepreneurial summit provides hothouse for young Jewish innovators

By Raphael Ahren

The sight of a woman with a shaven head and a nose piercing conversing about the future of the Jewish people with a Haredi-looking man with a beard and long side locks would turn heads in many places in Israel. At this week's ROI Summit for Young Jewish Innovators, they hardly stood out among 120 Jewish social entrepreneurs meeting in Tel Aviv to attend professional workshops, network and discuss their various projects.

Founded five years ago, ROI (Return on Investment) is a network for young Jewish adults working on various ventures seeking to strengthen Jewish identity, education or values such as tikkun olam, repairing the world. Projects range from documentaries about the Israeli punk scene through Internet portals for Jewish environmentalism to groups fighting for the acceptance of lesbians in the Orthodox community. ROI members come from around the world, but mostly English speaking countries, and span the gamut of religious observance.

On Monday night, Joel Shalit - brother of kidnapped soldier Gilad Shalit - addressed summit participants, many of whom sent Twitter messages of sympathy as he spoke. A selection of ROI members then gave a taste of their ventures. Lindsay Litowitz, for example, said her Four Corners Project wants to prove that "the Jewish world is more than Woody Allen and bagels." She and her team travel around the world to document life in lesser-known Jewish communities of the Diaspora, such as Morocco, Turkey or Ukraine. Lacey Schwartz showed a trailer of her moving film "Outside the Box," in which she focuses on herself and her "dual identity." Having been brought up in a typical American Jewish family, she discovered at eighteen that she was the result of an affair between her mother and an African-American.

The evening also had really lighthearted moments. Right after Ari Teman - who won last year's inaugural Jewish Community Hero contest from The Jewish Federations of North America for creating the JCorps charity organization - proved his talents as a stand up comedian, Lisa Appel, 35, took the stage and dressed up like a jester, performing a number of acrobatic routines while reciting the Hebrew alphabet. She then got the entire room dancing to a catchy tune intended to help elementary children remember the 10 commandments.

Each year, 120 young entrepreneurs who apply to and are accepted into ROI - which is mainly funded by U.S. philanthropist Lynn Schusterman - attend the annual summit, which first ran in 2006. Summit graduates are then eligible for various grants. The goal is for Jewish social entrepreneurs to exchange ideas and participate in workshops led by professionals, who teach them how translate their ideas into successful enterprises. Marking ROI's fifth summit, the organization this year awarded \$500,000 in grants to 35 initiatives by members from 11 countries.

Veteran ROI member and Chicago native Jeremy Hulsh, 31, who now lives in Tel Aviv, said that this year ROI "decided to change their model a little bit and bring back people whom they initially supported and reinvest in the individuals." Hulsh received \$50,000 from ROI to expand his Oleh Records project, which helps Israeli musicians release records all over the world.

He said that Schusterman is focusing on the individual and not necessarily on the project. "The idea is to support the individual who has ideas and passions," he said. "I'm into music and supporting artists, somebody else is into supporting ecology, and so on. Everyone has their own expertise and everyone's thriving."



L to R: Jacob Shwartz,
Beto Maya, Jimmy
Salinas and Asael
Kahana at ROI on
Monday, July 5, 2010.

Photo by: Adi Cohen