



Leading innovators gather to strengthen Jewish future

By SAM CROSS
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Kfar Maccabiah conference to feature 120 participants from 28 countries.

Photo by: Courtesy

Top minds from the international Jewish community will converge on Kfar Maccabiah this Sunday to strategize how to build a stronger future for the Jewish people.

Hailing from San Salvador to Beijing, these Jewish entrepreneurs, innovators, thinkers and artists will come from all over the world to attend the ROI Global Summit for Young Jewish Innovators.

At the summit, 120 participants will represent 28 different countries, with a third coming from Israel, a third from North America and a third from the rest of the world, according to a ROI spokesman. The entire ROI network includes 500 people from 40 countries.

"I think that one of the things that is quite unique about us is that we are an incredibly diverse and inclusive network," said ROI director Justin Korda. "From Jewish education to new media to environmentalism to arts and culture, there are significant challenges the Jewish community faces, and our members are at the helm of creating solutions to these challenges."

Since ROI's inception five years ago, the network's crosspollination of ideas has led to a wide variety of successful start-ups. After attending the first ROI conference, Sarah Lestin created G-dcast, a Web site that provides readers with a cartoon about the week's Torah portion. In 2007, David Cygielman started Moishe House, which focuses on providing Jews in between college and starting a family with a community. Cygielman used the ROI network to establish 30 Moishe Houses in 10 countries on five continents.

"Moishe Houses around the world have started because of meetings at ROI events," Korda said.

In honor of ROI's five-year anniversary, the organization that usually invites 120 new Jewish leaders to its annual conference has instead decided only to call upon alumni to gather in Israel next week.

Nine months ago, ROI organizers decided that it would be best for the organization to take some time to look inward, according to Korda.

"We wanted to bring back our alumni into the fold and create a new conference in which we asked them to think critically about where this network is going in the future," Korda said. "We realized that the key to growth in our network is to listen to our members and understand their needs."

Instead of simply making decisions as they come along, the purpose of the conference is to establish a vision for the future of the ROI network and the Jewish community as a whole. The program that Lynn Schusterman first started as a one-time conference has grown into a complex web of projects, speaker series, regional conferences, and even a Web site for online networking.

"[Famed Lithuanian] Rabbi [Yisroel] Salanter said, 'First, a person should put his house together, then his town, then the world,'" Korda said. "So we are dividing the conference into three parts... learning about ourselves... learning about each other and each other's projects... and then spending a lot of time talking about the challenges facing the Jewish people today."

After attending last year's ROI Global Summit, Evelyn Goldfinger, a 28-year-old Jew from Buenos Aires, has returned for inspiration. As founder and director of El Toratron Jewish Educational Theater, Goldfinger has combined her love for Judaism, education and theater.

"It's great to feel like you're not the only one devoting your efforts to promote Jewish culture," said Goldfinger.

"It's hard where I come from to be a young Jewish innovator instead of working in mainstream secular theater."

Through her performances, Goldfinger's work deals with Jewish holidays and weekly Torah portion themes. She has written, performed in and directed each of the 14 plays the company has presented since 2007, at schools, congregations, and theaters.

Even though Goldfinger has had great success, she hopes that this year's conference will reinvigorate her and her work.

"It's all about having a group of very creative people learning and being inspired from each other," she said.