

BBYO Parents,

My name is Larry Marks. My wife, Mindy, and I have two teenagers who have had wonderful experiences with BBYO, and I am writing to tell you about what BBYO has done for my family.

My son, Sammy Marks, is a sophomore at the U of I School of Engineering in Champaign. At the end of the eighth grade, he was invited to a meeting of the Haganah chapter of AZA, the boys division of BBYO. In spite of his shyness around unfamiliar people, he went to the meeting and decided to go back for a second meeting. Four years later, my reticent son “graduated” from BBYO as Regional AZA President with the ability to inspire and lead his peers and with an understanding of organizational behavior and Jewish life. These experiences continue to guide him as he currently serves on the (adult) Governing Board of U of I Hillel, focusing on strategic planning and fundraising.

I wish I could claim full credit for his remarkable growth and development during his high school years, but I must give significant credit to the Haganah boys and their advisors who took him under their wings. By the end of the 9th grade, they recognized in him a capacity for leadership that was still difficult for his family and his teachers to see. The high school seniors in Haganah nurtured him, demanded that he make and keep commitments to BBYO and the broader Jewish community and passed on the mantle of leadership. It was a joy for me to see Sammy, as a senior, do the same for the Haganah freshmen and sophomores, teaching them about respect for themselves, their families, their community and the young women in their lives, including the members of BBG (B’nai B’rith Girls). He was maintaining a long BBYO tradition of nurturing support provided by older members of BBYO to younger members.

My daughter, Shira Marks, is a junior at Evanston Township High school and is actively involved in Korczak BBG, the Skokie/Evanston-based chapter of BBG. Unlike my son, she has never been shy around new people – she sees any crowd as an opportunity to have a party. For her, BBG has been a reliable group of friends with strong ties to the Jewish community and a source of guidance and feedback as she develops her own skills in group leadership and community organizing. On one hand, she can be herself and test herself in a very safe and accepting environment. On the other hand, she is being challenged to excel. For instance, through BBYO, she has attended a national AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) meeting and has been selected as one of 40 high school students from around the U.S. to spend 4 days at the Saban Institute in Washington, D.C. studying organizing strategies to support Israel and Jewish issues on high school campuses.

Like you, I am proud of my kids. But raising my teens has not been an easy job, and my wife and I could not have done it alone. We have had help from our family, friends, schools and volunteer organizations. Specifically, we have benefited enormously from watching our kids grow in BBYO. We have two very different children with very different needs and talents. But AZA and BBG have offered them a safe and accepting second home in which they can thrive, grow and talk about how to deal with their parents, their schools and their quickly evolving worlds.

We will also benefit from watching your kids grow in BBYO. We are lucky that my daughter’s BBG chapter holds its meetings in our living room. Almost every week, our house is filled with a wonderful energy that comes from good kids taking care of themselves, each other and their community. It is our pleasure.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions (847-869-2050 or lmarks18@yahoo.com).

Thanks and Shalom,

Larry Marks