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Leaders-in-training

By JOSH HASTEN
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At the beginning of 2010, 25-year-old Londoner and college graduate Danielle Abraham was simply looking for a short-term Israel program that could provide her with a meaningful real-life and authentic Israeli experience. That fall, she was fortunate to be accepted into the prestigious Menachem Begin Heritage Center's Israel Government Fellows Program, which combines a 10-month internship in government offices along with educational seminars and Hebrew language instruction (ulpan).

Little did she know at the time but her internship placement within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Mashav Division (The Agency for International Development Cooperation) would have a great impact on her professional career as well as on her life as a whole.

In June 2011 – while still an unpaid intern with the Fellows Program – Mashav sent Abraham to New York to serve as their sole representative to the annual executive board meeting of the United Nation's Development Programme (UNDP). Hesitant at first, Abraham not only went, but she shined.

Impressed with how well she represented Mashav, and after reading her reports on the meeting upon her return, the ministry offered her a fulltime position at the consulate in New York. But Abraham realized that she wanted a life in Israel and turned the offer down, insisting on making aliya and requested to work for Mashav as a paid employee in Jerusalem.

After intense negotiations with the ministry, her request was accommodated. After making aliya a reality, Abraham was offered a position as a Jerusalem-based policy advisor for Mashav, working to help strengthen quality of life in developing countries via Israel's relationship with international aid organizations, including the prominent Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Paul Gross, The Israel Government Fellow's program director, himself a fairly recent oleh from England, is not surprised by Abraham's success story. He says that "there are at least five other program alumnae currently working in the Foreign Service."

He attributes their accomplishments primarily to the program itself, saying that "through the experience we provide our fellows, they gain a real understanding of the importance Israel plays in the world, and most importantly develop a connection between Israel and their own personal Jewish identity."

According to Gross, the goal of Israel Government Fellows, which was founded in 2007, "is to strengthen the connection future Jewish leaders have to the Land of Israel. We provide them [through their internships] with professional skills they will utilize in their careers, while at the same time we help them experience real-life Israel – living here and working here, truly as part of society."

IN ADDITION to the internship aspect of the program, which consists of a demanding Sunday-Thursday full-time placement at a government ministry, Thursdays are dedicated to comprehensive educational seminars at the Begin Center, where participants are able to hear from speakers representing the top of their fields in academia, journalism and government, among other professions.

Gross says the goal is to “give the participants a glimpse into all aspects of Israel society, so they can gain a real understanding of the complexities facing Israel’s leaders today.”

Participants are also taken on extended overnight trips throughout the country during the year, to learn firsthand about the land itself and its diverse populations. At the beginning of the program they are also given an intensive Hebrew language course (ulpan) to help them with a quick integration into their placements.

Gross is proud that nearly a quarter of the program’s alumnae, numbering approximately 100 participants since its founding, have made aliya.

“Most of those that haven’t,” he says, “remain active members of their Jewish communities at home, and are involved in Israel activism. In addition, through their experience they now have the ability to answer questions about Israel effectively if engaged at home, since they know what they are talking about.”

Gross says the program, which is a recognized partner of Masa – a joint project of the Government of Israel and the Jewish Agency for Israel, which offers young adults from abroad educational opportunities here – accepts a diverse group of participants each year, from countries around the world and that come from a broad spectrum of political backgrounds.

“It doesn’t matter if you are to the Right or the Left,” says Gross, “we are looking for Jewish applicants who are already extremely accomplished in their young lives, and are committed to working hard in making a contribution to Israeli society.”

Gross says the application committee is “highly selective” in seeking out tomorrow’s Jewish leaders.

The program is certainly not inexpensive, with tuition fees around \$15,000 per session not including housing.

However, Masa does grant each student around \$4,500 to participate, while the Begin Center itself chips in with \$2,000 per student. Also, daily transportation costs to and from the participant’s placement are covered.

This year there are 19 fellows on the program and they have taken on internships throughout a wide variety of ministries including Foreign Affairs, Justice and Finance.

Once a placement is chosen the fellows are given a “mentor” at their respective ministry who assigns them projects and looks after their progress.

“Our interns are given serious work including writing reports, ministers’ speeches, event planning, or hosting delegations from abroad. Most of the work is in English. The mentors understand that these interns are here to take on serious responsibilities, and are not here to make photocopies, or coffee. They truly become part of the staff.”

Gross says that the feedback he has gotten from the various ministries over the years has nearly universally been positive, and ministries are always eager to accept new fellows, year after year.

26-year-old Dan Barnett, who was born in South Africa and now lives in Australia, is a current participant in the Fellows program.

He describes his internship as an economist for Israel’s Securities Authority (ISA) as being “intense.” His responsibilities include working on projects involving both local and global financial markets.

Barnett says that while he’s only an intern “I have been given a great deal of responsibility, working with an intimate team, and I feel like I am really making a difference for Israel.”

Upon completion of the Fellows Program, Barnett plans to return to Sydney and pursue a career as a

cooperative adviser in the banking industry. He says that spending time experiencing real life in Israel has enriched his sense of Zionism, while at the same time has left him somewhat more conflicted with his personal views.

“Living here and experiencing Israel firsthand [as opposed to hearing about Israel from abroad], it is difficult to turn a blind eye to what’s going on when everything is staring at you in the face.” He adds that “for sure I’ve become more emotional and passionate about Israel, but definitions and solutions [to the conflict with the Arabs for example] seem more open-ended when you are living it.”

AN EXAMPLE of Barnett’s passion for Israel is a grassroots social action initiative he along with three other Fellows started, which goes above and beyond the program’s requirements.

Known as the “Clean the Land,” movement, Barnett and his peers are aiming to create a litter-free and more eco-friendly Israel.

They are doing so by calling for all current Masa participants, and the Israeli public at large, to take to the streets, beaches and parks in their local communities and pick up trash.

In fact, the inaugural “Clean the Land Day” took place across the country last month.

According to Barnett, hundreds of Masa participants broke off into teams and along with members of local Israeli communities around the country went out into their neighborhoods with gloves and garbage bags to pick up all trash in sight.

Barnett is confident that the inaugural Clean the Land initiative will become an annual event where Masa joins with their local neighbors to beautify the country.

He says the idea came about when he and his friends were looking for a way to contribute to their homes in Israel. “We live here, eat, sleep and play here,” he says. “While not all of us might make aliya, we are here now so this is our home. We wanted to give back to the community and do something that will benefit the public, and might one day benefit those of us who do come back full time and raise our families here.”

Herzl Makov, the president of the Menachem Begin Heritage Center, is proud of Barnett and the other Israel Government Fellows, both past and present, for their accomplishments within their placements and their overall contributions to Israeli society.

It was Makov that came up with the idea for the program, seeking in his words a way to “combine the legacy of Menachem Begin – his beliefs in government quality, government ethics and the need to serve the people – with offering Jews from the Diaspora a way to strengthen their relationship to the Jewish homeland.”

Makov is convinced the program is accomplishing its mission. He has received great feedback from participants, the ministries themselves, and feels that “the fact that a substantial amount of Fellows are making aliya is an accomplishment within itself. In short,” he says, “I feel the program truly represents the Begin heritage.”



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