

# Upper Park Heights Mural Unites Black, Jewish, Latino Youth

Simone Ellin



A recent Sunday at the Park Heights Jewish Community Center saw a group of middle school boys — Orthodox, African-American and Latino — gathered for the final session in a series of workshops that began last September.

The boys, who all live in Upper Park Heights, were there to discuss, problem-solve, write and paint about some of the conflicts that can arise when people of diverse ethnic backgrounds and religions share a geographic area.

A pilot program of the JCC funded by the Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Fund for Enrichment of Jewish Education, the project was led by local artist Jay Wolf Schlossberg-Cohen and facilitated by Phil Miller, vice president of outreach for the Park Heights JCC, and Jill Solomon, a local poet. It will culminate in the creation of a large mural that will be displayed in a public location in Upper Park Heights sometime this spring.

“We wanted to bring together kids from different communities within the northern Park Heights neighborhood so they could get to know each other a little bit,” Miller says.



The JCC partnered with other institutions in the neighborhood, including Comprehensive Housing Assistance Inc. and the Cross Country Elementary/Middle School and Fallstaff Elementary/Middle School. Miller called on Schlossberg-Cohen, the JCC’s arts and culture task force chair, to lead the project. Schlossberg-Cohen has been doing community art projects like this for more than 20 years. In fact, he created the mural in the Park Heights JCC’s lobby depicting the surrounding neighborhood.

“As Jews,” he says, “we have been ‘the other.’ We can be misunderstood by people who don’t know who we are. When we bring the kids together through art and installation of the art, they start to know each other, and they recognize what’s unique and what’s similar.”

But this doesn’t happen overnight, he says. “One of the reasons I do workshops over a long period of time is to develop trust between participants,” Schlossberg-Cohen says. “That takes a long time. We can’t have the same discussion at the first session that we have at the 10th session. The trust builds gradually, and the stories unveil themselves slowly.”

## Trust Building

Typically the sessions include sketching, discussion, painting and refreshments. Boys and several adults — community leaders like Officer John King, director of education and training for the Baltimore Police Department; Curtis Durham, principal of Cross Country Elementary School; and Nathan Paluzzi, Fallstaff Elementary/Middle School’s art teacher, as well as student volunteers — are encouraged to share their beliefs and biases.

Doral Pulley II, an African-American student in the seventh grade at Cross Country Elementary/Middle School, says the workshops have taught him more about Jews and what is going on in the community. "We've learned why disagreements happen," he says.



David Lee, 14, who attends Talmudical [Academy](#), says it has been good to learn about other cultures. "It's also good to find out what other people think about your culture. We have learned about stereotypes and about what would cause others not to like you and your culture," he says.

Yonah Ruttenberg attends the workshops with his 12-year-old son, Yehuda. "I just thought it was such a cool thing," he says. "It's great for them to hear from people with other perspectives."

At the final session, participants were asked to describe three challenges faced by their community as well as three possible solutions. Schlossberg-Cohen addressed the group before they began: "We are struggling in our community. What are the problems? How can we solve them? We want to hear about the situation through your eyes. You can be honest. We have built up a level of trust here."

Solomon, who is poet-in-residence at Temple Emanuel, led one of the group discussions. She spoke of growing up in Missouri and having no contact with people from other backgrounds.

"We had no knowledge except for stereotypes from our elders. It was not until I went to [college](#) that I learned about diversity," says Solomon.

At Fallstaff Elementary/Middle, Paluzzi admits that he feels cut off from the Jewish community. "It's like we're in this cocoon, and the two communities don't interact." Officer King said he believes most problems are caused by fear of the unknown. "People pass each other like ships in the night. They don't know about one another."

After the table talks, the groups start painting. Although some (mostly the adults) were intimidated, very soon they were fully engrossed in their artworks. When they finished, out came the pizza.



Later, Schlossberg-Cohen will photograph each painting and make a collage. He'll combine the students' [work](#) with his own art to create a mural inspired by the project. Members of the community will help to paint and mount it. "It's a community process," he says. "When people see their work on a wall, they can't believe it. Now they have become stakeholders in the project. That is the power of the mural."

Said the JCC's Miller: "Just getting acquainted is a real challenge in northern Park Heights. This starts to build bridges. The kids get a sense of one another beneath their surface impressions. We're looking at generations of not being aware of each other. If a few friendships are formed, that would be fantastic."

**Photo captions:**

1. This drawing will adorn the community mural.; 2. Curtis Durham (left), principal of Cross Country Elementary/Middle School, and Jill Solomon, poet-in-residence at Temple Emanuel, participate in a dialogue.; 3. Abigail Bleakney's colorful design for a future community art mural (David Stuck)