



# Building a Community of Jewish Teens

A Model Documentation of the  
North Shore Teen Initiative

The beauty of NSTI is it gets us all together. We're becoming friends with Jewish teens who might not otherwise have had any Jewish friends.

Jacob Cline, NSTI teen, Hamilton, MA



By investing in promising Jewish education grant initiatives, the Jim Joseph Foundation seeks to foster compelling, effective Jewish learning experiences for young Jews in the United States. Established in 2006, the Jim Joseph Foundation has awarded \$285 million in grants to engage, educate, and inspire young Jewish minds to discover the joy of living vibrant Jewish lives.

[www.jimjosephfoundation.org](http://www.jimjosephfoundation.org)



The North Shore Teen Initiative (NSTI) is committed to building community among Jewish teens through institutional collaboration, a rich spectrum of innovative programming, and participation in national opportunities. By collaborating across the North Shore community, offering new experientially based programming rooted in Jewish values and learning, and expanding opportunities to participate in "best practices" programming and beyond, NSTI connects Jewish teens to their peers and motivates participation in Jewish life.

[www.nsteeninitiative.org](http://www.nsteeninitiative.org)



Dear Colleague,

They came by the busloads and by cars from different cities, different Jewish youth groups, different synagogues, and different Jewish backgrounds—all arriving as quickly as they could to beautiful Camp Yavneh in New Hampshire. They were ready to spend the weekend with Jewish friends, have fun, and learn. What was the occasion?

Nothing. It was just a regular fall weekend.

So what exactly was it? What brought the teens there? What was the one thing connecting them all?

In this report, we document the evolution of the North Shore Teen Initiative (NSTI), a pilot project in the North Shore of Boston to increase Jewish teen engagement. By sharing all of the components of NSTI, along with some lessons learned along the way, we strive to help other communities adapt the model and implement their own teen Jewish engagement initiatives.

At a moment in American Jewish life when so many are looking for that "answer" to youth engagement, this report offers insights about one success story. The NSTI model could be a part of that answer for increased Jewish engagement for Jewish youth in certain communities.

This description includes the most critical components that have led to NSTI's successes—important contextual and readiness factors, core methods and approaches, financial information, important personal and organizational relationships that supported implementation, challenges encountered, and stories from the field.

Our hope is to present this information transparently. Each section covers a different area of the NSTI model at various stages of the initiative's development. And while some of the information is presented chronologically, the report's sections are not an entirely linear description of NSTI. By breaking down the model into these components, communities will begin to understand if they are positioned to adapt this model—and, if so, how to implement it.

For the Jim Joseph Foundation, effective Jewish education with this demographic is a strategic priority. To date, the Foundation has invested \$79.6 million in Jewish teen education with the goal of fostering effective learning experiences for Jewish teens, ages 13 to 18. Beginning in 2008, the Foundation awarded a series of grants totaling \$1,756,043 through 2015 to pilot NSTI.

Effective and compelling Jewish learning experiences don't just happen. But when young people engage in Jewish learning experiences as adolescents, they are more likely to live vibrant Jewish lives as adults. This truth drives our efforts. We hope that by documenting this model, others will be able to engage Jewish teens and provide them with opportunities to experience Jewish life in ways that are meaningful to them.

Handwritten signature of Alvin T. Levitt in black ink.

Alvin T. Levitt  
President

Handwritten signature of Chip Edelsberg in black ink.

Chip Edelsberg, Ph.D.  
Executive Director





## Forming the Best Team to Realize the Vision

Building NSTI from the ground up

In its first conceptual stages, NSTI was a pilot project that was limited in scope when presented to the Jim Joseph Foundation. Jerry Somers, a member of the Foundation Board of Directors, shepherded the concept and first discussed it with the Foundation professional team.

But quickly, the Foundation determined that the idea formed was bigger than its initial iteration and invited a grant proposal. A team of four consisting of Jerry, the head of the JCC, a rabbi from Gloucester, and a community lay leader with a degree from Harvard Business School—along with two grant-writing professionals—developed and submitted a more substantial grant proposal.

These efforts resulted in the \$981,043 grant to develop NSTI as a three-year pilot program.

### A Board of Directors Reflecting the Community's Diversity

As with any organization, selection of the NSTI Board of Directors offered an opportunity. The team that crafted the grant proposal invited other community members to join the Board. What relationships, resources, and experience could a potential Director provide? All were factors to be taken into consideration. For NSTI, the Board represented and continues to represent the region in which it operates—a mix of geographic areas, synagogue affiliations, and levels of involvement with other organizations. It reflects the Jewish diversity of the North Shore communities. And, from its initial formation, the Board has been composed of a 50/50 split between community institution leaders and parents of teens. At all times, one rabbi from a North Shore synagogue has served as a member.

Our Board members are passionate and thoughtful, and each brings a diverse expertise to the table. They have been critical in every stage of NSTI's development.

*Lajla LeBlanc, NSTI Marketing and Program Coordinator*

These defining Board characteristics continue to date and have set the tone for NSTI as a true community-wide, collaborative, and pluralistic initiative.

### A Working Board

Along with its Jewish and geographic diversity, NSTI Directors serve on a working Board. Members have been extremely active in planning and staffing events. The line between Board members and paid staff continues to be somewhat blurred—and this is a positive characteristic. Throughout the pilot period, Board directors have done whatever is needed to make events a success, from setting up tables to transportation to myriad other critical tasks. Today, as the Foundation grant period concludes and NSTI transitions to sustainability through local support, the Board also focuses on organizational capacity and fundraising. Having a Board whose directors still reflect the entire Jewish community increases networking and fundraising opportunities.

It was really important to have an active board whose members had different streams of connectivity within the community. Our board includes professionals from Jewish organizations and individuals who serve on other boards of Jewish organizations too.

*Susan Cohen, NSTI Board Chair (2010-2013) and parent, Middleton*

Individuals were and continue to be attracted to serve on the Board for a variety of reasons. For some, as with teens, a peer relationship is the deciding factor. Once they learn that a friend is on the Board, they are happy to join too. Others become involved because it is a chance to create more Jewish opportunities for their community.

I really wanted to do something community-wide, outside of just my temple. I wanted to be more involved in an actual project that would create Jewish life for the future. The more I've been on this Board, the more I am fascinated by this big concept—shaping the Jewish community and creating future Jewish leaders.

*Mindy McMahon, NSTI Board member and parent, Marblehead*

Having a diverse core group that was committed from the beginning was very important. And you have to make sure to maintain both of those qualities as the Board experiences turnover.

*Bonnie Shelkot, NSTI Board member, Beverly, MA*



## Selecting Staff

For many involved with NSTI—from Board members to teens to parents to partner organizations—selecting the right executive director is now seen as *the* most important decision.

The search committee, consisting of community leaders, professionals, and even teens, understood that the right leader would bring to the table a wide skill set: the ability to relate to teens, to make Jewish learning fun and interesting, and to organize and plan accordingly. NSTI sought an executive director whose personality and charisma matched the requisite management skills and experience as a Jewish educator.

In Adam Smith, NSTI's executive director since its founding, the search committee found someone with a broad and impressive skill set. In eight years at a Massachusetts area synagogue, starting as the full-time youth group advisor and progressing to director of the 8th to 12th grade youth program, he interacted with teens, parents, and synagogue leaders. While there, Adam managed both the educational and social programming for teens.

In dealing with the teens directly today, Adam possesses the intangible qualities so important to obtaining their buy-in. His charisma, authenticity, and true passion for Jewish life lend immediate credibility with teens. *They* want to be around *him*. This alone cannot be taken for granted. It helps attract teens to events and allows Adam to begin serious Jewish engagement. With graduate coursework in Jewish Educational Theory at Brandeis and Hebrew College, Adam is a Jewish educator who makes Jewish life and learning fun, attractive, and relevant to the teen audience.

Adam is the perfect person to do this—he's smart, he's a role model, he can stay calm, and he knows how to convey to teens his love of Judaism.

Janet Cline, NSTI parent, Hamilton

During the search process, the committee did not realize the importance of hiring an individual with the ability to cultivate collaboration with other Jewish organizations—a key skill that Adam possesses. By taking time to build relationships with other professionals, and continuing to foster those relationships, Adam slowly started to break down the silos and barriers in his first year. Because he never had lived or worked in the North Shore, few organizations knew him—and this was a *benefit*. He came with no “baggage” and built relationships from the ground up.

Adam helped to shape NSTI and make it effective. In areas in which he lacked experience—development and budget—the Board helped Adam improve his skills. With their assistance, he has become more effective at solicitations and financial management.

Six months into NSTI's existence, a second staff member joined the team. Lajla LeBlanc, NSTI's Marketing and Program Coordinator, had experience in non-profit management, marketing, and development. Her skills complemented Adam's and were instrumental in developing and maintaining a database of teens. After her first year, as NSTI began concentrating more on programming, Lajla focused on marketing events with which NSTI was involved. Her technological and management skills, and her own rapport with teens, continue to contribute to NSTI's success.

The relationship between staff and Board has always been marked by open dialogue, an honest exchange of ideas, and a willingness from all parties to work together diligently. This dynamic was instrumental in developing NSTI into the community-wide initiative it is today.



## Logic Model

Board members and staff worked with the Jim Joseph Foundation to develop NSTI's Logic Model (below). The Foundation develops these guiding documents with grantees before moving forward with initiatives. The Logic Model defines challenges, strategies, and the outcomes to be pursued. Throughout NSTI's evolution, Board members and staff have utilized the document to maintain focus and to measure benchmarks of success.

Challenges	Key Strategies	Short-Term Outcomes (3 years)	Long-Term Outcomes
<p>Many North Shore Jewish teens have limited connection with Jewish teens outside their immediate town, with Jewish institutions, and with the broader Jewish community.</p> <p>Communities of Jewish teen peers are dispersed, under-organized, or do not exist.</p> <p>Existing community programs would benefit from an infusion of content-rich, experientially based programming.</p> <p>Many North Shore parents of Jewish teens have limited knowledge of activities and opportunities that would enhance the ongoing Jewish education of their teens.</p>	<p>Engage North Shore Jewish teens in the creation, support, and promotion of innovative Jewish teen experiences that involve meaningful Jewish learning.</p> <p>Enhance and broaden existing teen engagement in Jewish learning by building institutional and programmatic partnerships with synagogues and other teen-focused agencies/organizations.</p> <p>Offer new, experiential activities and programs, leveraging best practices from New England and beyond.</p> <p>Establish an infrastructure that identifies and tracks teens, “gets the word out” about Jewish engagement and learning opportunities, and creates Jewish teen networks.</p>	<p><b>North Shore Jewish Teen Outcomes</b> Outreach to the 23 communities of the North Shore with participation coming from at least 15 of the towns by the end of 2011.</p> <p>Increase number of teens participating in at least one NSTI activity from programmatic years 2009 to 2011.</p> <p>Increase number of teens participating in more than one NSTI activity in a calendar year.</p> <p>Establish a core of teens actively involved in program design, leadership, peer-to-peer promotion, or implementation of Jewish experiential activities.</p> <p>Increase number of teens making use of social media for sharing pictures, posts, tags, feedback, or follow-up from NSTI activities from programmatic years 2009 to 2011.</p> <p>Teens will report that their participation in compelling experiential NSTI activities enhanced their understanding of what it means to live Jewishly.</p> <p><b>NSTI Program and Partner Outcomes</b> NSTI is a hub for teen engagement and learning as evidenced by such indicators as increased website and social media activity, increased requests from institutional partners for collaboration, and an increase in the number of programs and activities from programmatic years 2009 to 2011.</p>	<p><b>Participants in NSTI will continue to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participate actively in the Jewish community</li> <li>Live an active, vibrant life guided by Jewish principles</li> <li>Pursue Jewish education</li> </ul> <p><b>NSTI is sustained and financially viable as an organization with:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strong long-term relationships with institutional funders</li> <li>Community leaders, institutional partners, parents, and board leaders providing and garnering resources for NSTI</li> <li>Lay and professional succession planning</li> </ul>

## Fostering Relationships and Community Support

Breaking down barriers in order to work together

Once the right leadership was in place and goals were defined, NSTI began the challenging work of relationship building. Understandably, Jewish organizations and synagogues can be protective of their members and region. So, when a new Jewish organization or initiative arrives, there may be a “Who are you?” reaction.

Overcoming this sentiment was one of NSTI’s greatest challenges. But, deliberately and strategically, NSTI set out to create relationships during its first year of existence.

### Listening Tour

NSTI made community friends in its first year with a pluralistic approach and by spending time with local agencies, organizations, and teens to better understand the community dynamics and opportunities. These meetings were not lavish presentations about NSTI’s goals. Rather, they were meant to be exactly what the tour’s title implies—a chance to listen and learn.

In what areas were the existing organizations working and succeeding? Where could NSTI truly affect Jewish teen engagement and learning in the North Shore? What would be NSTI’s value-added in these efforts? By first listening, NSTI demonstrated that it wanted to *support* existing programs and organizations. It was serious about creating partnerships and working together.

The tour also helped NSTI better define its own goals and position itself to achieve them. NSTI learned how and where it could help increase Jewish teen engagement. For example, NSTI realized that it could provide a new entry point for Jewish teens by offering service-learning programming, discussed further in this report. While this programming wouldn’t be implemented until later, NSTI identified other, more immediate ways through which it could foster collaboration and offer value to the community. This type of understanding minimized the chances of infringing upon the space of other organizations.

As a youth director, I have really been helped by NSTI. It is the only organization that can reach all the teens in the 23 communities. The North Shore needs something that can pull all the teens together. Kids who’ve done their programs love them. These kids are our future, and NSTI is keeping them interested in Judaism.

*Sue Callum, Youth Director, Temple Ner Tamid, Peabody*

### Fostering Collaboration

The listening tour was a key relationship builder with community members and organizations. With the knowledge gained from the tour, NSTI began to act. Collaborative efforts with Congregation Shirat Hayam (Reform) in Swampscott, for example, developed quickly in the first year. After learning about the synagogue’s needs, NSTI helped Shirat Hayam start its youth group. Adam attended meetings with the education director and offered consultations on strategy and implementation. This served as a clear signal that NSTI truly wanted to *help* existing synagogues and organizations.

NSTI spent a year building trust with all of the professionals in the community, helping make their youth groups better. Part of the vision of NSTI was that a rising tide raises all boats. And that’s what happened.

*Jed Filler, Director of Center for Jewish Education, Congregation Shirat Hayam*

Later, NSTI was instrumental in helping Shirat Hayam and Temple Emanu-El (Conservative) in Newton hire a joint youth director, an unprecedented development in the North Shore. A qualified youth director who was compensated by and had the resources of two synagogues brought a higher skill set to the position and connected with more teens.

NSTI also found ways in its first year to directly help families and to support other Jewish initiatives. As one example, NSTI partnered with the Foundation for Jewish Camp to offer scholarships for teens to attend Jewish summer camps. While ultimately NSTI stopped offering incentive scholarships (they were not attracting new families to Jewish camp and, at the same time, the North Shore Jewish community began to offer financial assistance for Jewish camp), they helped demonstrate an early aspect of NSTI’s value-added to the community.

The campership incentive grants helped us develop relationships with parents and teens, and it showed that we really were here to create more Jewish experiences for teens.

*Lajla LeBlanc, NSTI Marketing and Programming Coordinator*



As another example, NSTI positioned itself as the “connective tissue” of North Shore teen activities. NSTI asked other organizations about their upcoming events and then promoted those events on its website, helping to register participants and to provide marketing opportunities. Parents began to see NSTI as a central hub of information on North Shore Jewish teen opportunities and began to call NSTI to learn how their teens could become more involved—in any program or organization.

Some relationships took longer to develop and some are still developing. A key strategy was to identify early and easy ways to offer value, while not rushing into programming. The silos didn’t always disappear quickly. But the willingness to collaborate on almost any Jewish engagement initiative, to find ways to make Jewish experiences more accessible, and to spotlight other organizations has helped break down barriers. NSTI is dedicated to making collaborations successful for all involved parties. While different communities across the country may have different needs from the North Shore, any community looking to adapt this model must determine those needs—and find ways to meet them.





## Supporting Existing Programs and Creating New Opportunities

Changing the North Shore Jewish teen experience

### A Willingness to Experiment

During NSTI's first year, primarily spent listening and getting to know the community, NSTI's programming was strategically very limited. Only three events were planned, all of which were opportunities for teens to participate in immersive Jewish programs outside of the North Shore (and were not being done at the time by other organizations). As part of its relationship-building efforts, NSTI asked staff from North Shore Jewish groups to have a presence at these events. NSTI assumed responsibility for the logistics and funding of the programs.

But, in its second year, staff and Board were ready to transition NSTI into initiating programs, activities, and experiences. Yet they still did not exactly know what form this would take. Rather, NSTI was guided by three goals encompassed in its Theory of Change, a guiding document developed with the Jim Joseph Foundation.

- Increase the number of entry points for teen Jewish engagement in the North Shore.
- Increase the quality of those entry points.
- Increase the number of teens who are utilizing those entry points.

NSTI was more concerned with achieving these goals than with the type of programming that would lead to those achievements. Thus, NSTI was comfortable experimenting with different types of programs and frameworks for those programs. This flexibility helped NSTI ultimately determine which experiences would best engage more North Shore Jewish teens.

### A Two-Track Approach

Building off of its newly established relationships, NSTI chose for its first programming year to include offerings organized in conjunction with other groups, including SMARTY, USY, and YAISH. These generally smaller, fun events were primarily built around socializing or arts and culture. They were easily implemented and didn't demand a large audience. Teens already involved in active synagogue youth groups were a natural audience to reach and, critically, NSTI focused on helping to coordinate existing youth groups.

If organizations had an effective program—although attendance numbers may have been low—there was no need to reinvent the wheel. But what activities could be done together that groups were struggling to do separately? Multiple youth groups, for example, were doing some variation of a Laser Quest overnight, each one attracting about 15 teens to the event. NSTI connected the groups to one another and helped coordinate one large Laser Quest event. The single event attracted more teens and was an overall greater success. It also further established positive relationships with the other organizations and, by attracting groups of teens to *enjoyable* experiences, teens became familiar with NSTI in a positive way. Once NSTI was established within a group of teens as a *fun* organization that offered events *they* wanted, NSTI was able to reach teenagers who previously had not engaged with the organized Jewish community.

Before you do anything else, you have to get the kids to attend. Get them to something fun first and have them hang out with friends and meet new people. Then they're willing to try other activities.

*Ina-Lee Block, NSTI Founding Board Chair (2008-2010), Swampscott*

The relationships between NSTI and North Shore organizations and synagogues deepened as the programming efforts became more and more collaborative. Since NSTI was not created as a youth group, and therefore has no membership fee, other organizations did not fear losing their kids to NSTI. Only if NSTI saw a programming void to fill did it initiate its own programming. When teens said they wanted a chance to blend music with their Jewish identity, for example, NSTI delivered Rockfest. This program brought Jewish singer Josh Nelson to the community. But what made it unique were the bands, consisting of North Shore Jewish teens, that served as the opening acts. Eighty teens were eager to attend this event before any serious marketing had been done. Why? They wanted to have fun and see their friends perform.

A program like Rockfest reaches families and teens who otherwise wouldn't engage. It is a way to bring different types of people into the Jewish community. And then the teens make new friends and the community becomes bigger.

*Evelyn Rothbard, NSTI Board Member and parent, Marblehead*





## Adding Value to Program Offerings

At the same time as it pursued social events, NSTI entered into an entirely new programming arena. While the Lappin Foundation offered the Y2I trip, North Shore teens had no opportunities for organized domestic travel. This was a void that NSTI determined it could help fill. If it proved to be successful, NSTI would consider more of this type of programming. If, for whatever reason, the programming was not moving NSTI towards its defined goals, staff would reevaluate and try something else.

**Maccabi Artsfest** The North Shore JCC presented the first opportunity to form a partnership for a new program offering. Every year, in the same mode as the Maccabi Games (sports), Maccabi Artsfest brings together Jewish youth for a week of cultural learning and performances. Dance, music, singing, visual arts, and more are all part of the program. The local JCC always wanted to bring a group of teens, but never had the capacity or resources to make it happen. Collaboratively, the JCC and NSTI brought a North Shore group to Artsfest for a week of Jewish culture and learning. The JCC reached the teens who wanted to attend and NSTI provided transportation and funding; both organizations staffed the trip, indicative of the true partnership. Based on both the number of North Shore teens who participated and the experience itself, the partnership and event were successes that have become ongoing parts of NSTI's work.

**L'Taken** The "L'Taken Social Justice Seminar," a program of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, was another opportunity for NSTI to introduce a new travel offering to North Shore teens. In 2010, NSTI organized logistics and offered some financial support, helping 17 teens travel to Washington, D.C. for the four-day retreat. They joined more than 100 congregations from around the country to learn about Jewish values and social justice. North Shore teens now look forward to attending this event annually, with each L'Taken seminar including lobbying on Capitol Hill, a tour of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and a Havdalah service at a Washington memorial.

Why did these events succeed initially, and why do they continue to be successful annual events today? Of course the programming and experience offered at Artsfest and L'Taken are two important reasons. But another element, which applies to other successful NSTI events, is the travel component of the program.

Along with the natural excitement about leaving one's hometown, travel creates a somewhat "mini-camp" experience, fostering the ever-important feel of a close-knit group or community in a short time period. The travel creates an environment conducive for experiential learning.

## Service-Learning Programs

Undoubtedly, NSTI has experienced its greatest impact and greatest success with service-learning programming. Different from the purely social events generally organized by other groups, the service-learning opportunities were and continue to be initiated by NSTI. While other communities may have other programming voids to fill, NSTI determined that it was in this area where it could add the greatest value to the North Shore Jewish community.

With this understanding, NSTI had a vision to create an alternative spring break experience, similar to those offered by Hillel. After contacting numerous volunteer organizations outside of the North Shore, NSTI partnered with Habitat for Humanity to offer teens a week-long service-learning opportunity, entirely organized and marketed as an NSTI event for North Shore teens. In 2011 (the first year of this program), 19 teens participated, and the event continues to be a success today.

This experience [Habitat for Humanity trip to North Carolina] has opened my eyes and helped me realize the extent to which I am able to help people in this world, and how appreciative I am to NSTI and Habitat for the opportunity to give back.

*Dylann Cooper, NSTI teen, Beverly, in J-Shore North, April 2013*

In the first year of this programming, NSTI found that the Habitat for Humanity event and other early service-learning programs proved to be in high demand. Because of the scope of these events—they attracted teens from various Jewish backgrounds and from different North Shore communities—they were instrumental in breaking down silos and demonstrating that NSTI could change the landscape of the North Shore teen experience. NSTI had identified a touch-point for programming, and its flexible approach empowered NSTI to pursue more of these opportunities, either on its own or with partners.

NSTI created a stronger bond between my Jewish community and me. I have a stronger sense of Jewish identity and tikkun olam. There's nothing else like it for Jewish teens.

*Hannah Wolf, NSTI teen, Marblehead*

**J-Serve** J-Serve is a national annual day of service for Jewish youth around the world. Yet, North Shore Jewish teens never had the opportunity to participate in their community. NSTI partnered with BBYO in 2010 to bring J-Serve to the North Shore. This offered a new opportunity for teens, encompassed the entire community, and allowed teens to choose which volunteer experiences appealed most to them. NSTI continues to organize it annually, attracting an estimated 80-plus teens each year. The day ends with music and a barbeque for everyone who participated.

I know there was a tremendous amount of groundwork (no pun intended) in the weeks that led up to the J-Serve event, but it really paid off both for the Ford School and for all the teens (and adults) who participated. I think this was NSTI's best program ever. Not just because of how many kids participated, but because it combined so many NSTI priorities: It was social, hands on, tikkun olam-oriented, collaborative, community building, and celebratory.

*Maura Copeland, NSTI Board member, Swampscott, after NSTI's 2010 J-Serve event*

**L'Shaper** NSTI collaborates with Temple Sinai, a large Conservative congregation in the North Shore, to offer teens L'Shaper, a service-learning opportunity at the local Ford Elementary School. It is a weekly event, in which the teens first come together for dinner and a Jewish learning discussion, led by Adam Smith, or the rabbi from Temple Sinai, or a teacher from Prozdor, the Boston-based "high school of Hebrew College." The teens then travel to the school to facilitate academic enrichment activities for first to fifth grade students, while the parents of the grade students attend adult education classes.

A service-learning opportunity has to speak to the teens. They are drawn to it because either they haven't been getting this opportunity somewhere else—and they want it—or because their friends are doing it. Both elements are keys for building successful programming. When you're launching this model, the program content matters.

*Adam Smith, NSTI Executive Director*

Multiday, truly immersive experiences are proven grounds for teen Jewish engagement.\* This programming—or existing programming that improved because of NSTI—was something new and attractive to North Shore teens. In the first year of real programming, as teens began to tell their friends about NSTI, the network of engaged Jewish teens in the North Shore expanded. NSTI was positioned to collaborate on the smaller social events, while continuing to introduce the new Jewish service-learning and travel programs to North Shore teens.

Offering immersive service-learning programming will not be the answer for every community considering this model. But understanding the various elements of this programming offers important lessons about how it helped NSTI impact the North Shore Jewish teen experience.

Early on, these immersive events presented major marketing opportunities because they stood on their own as NSTI-organized events. Marketing opportunities built awareness about NSTI, attracting and engaging more teens.

Teens and their parents in the North Shore crave service-learning opportunities. In fact, evaluation shows that these programs were the second most important component for teen involvement, trailing only the social aspect of NSTI. A combination of altruistic feelings, improving college applications, traveling, or other reasons combine to make these events in demand and highly successful.

Teens of different ages generally mix well during these experiences. And, because the events inherently involve "doing," they can work well as a first event for teens. Socializing occurs more naturally in the midst of the volunteer activity.

NSTI ensures that the volunteer opportunity is real, honest, and fulfilling. The most successful service-learning opportunities create multiple opportunities that appeal to different teens from different Jewish backgrounds.

A Jewish learning lesson or programmatic element is part of every volunteer opportunity. NSTI tries to involve different "hip" people to lead these parts of the volunteer experience. This is much more appealing than the same individual leading the group every time.

NSTI took the lead in negotiating relationships and event details with service-learning sites in order to "create" educational service-learning opportunities for teens.

Collaborating with other organizations helps NSTI identify new and best practices for service-learning programs. This even has included collaboration on an international level, with a UK Mitzvah Day initiative.

NSTI initially thought service-learning events would be successful and impactful only as a series of events. But NSTI determined that these opportunities are successful as one-off events.

\* *Effective Strategies for Educating and Engaging Jewish Teens: What Jewish Communities Can Learn From Programs That Work*, published by Jim Joseph Foundation, April 2013.



### Infusing Programming with Jewish Content

While NSTI was not designed specifically for transmission of Jewish education, NSTI was intent on making Jewish learning an important element of most events. Today, nearly 75 percent of NSTI programs include some level of education, whether it is experiential learning through community service, 10 to 15 minutes of “framing” and explanation regarding how an activity relates to the Torah or Jewish values, or a leadership summit that includes a week of learning. Another 5 percent of the programs are built around a Shabbat or holiday experience, including weekend camp retreats with other Jewish organizations. The remaining 20 percent are social activities, designed to draw teens into the program offerings. NSTI always clarifies expectations about the Jewish educational value of activities before a program begins.

According to evaluation, teens and parents view NSTI programming as having a positive “Jewish outcome.” Both groups perceive NSTI as a driver of Jewish engagement and Jewish social relationships. In addition, teens’ self-perceptions suggest their Jewish identity has been strengthened as a result of NSTI. Finally, the number of parents who believe NSTI provides strong Jewish educational value is nearly the same as the number of parents who believe that it provides strong social value.

Time and again, teens have come to events to hang out with friends and have fun. Yet, at the same time, NSTI-sponsored programming has been rooted in Jewish values and learning.

**Torah Hub for Teens** In partnership with nearly every synagogue and Jewish organization in the North Shore, NSTI is a sponsor of Torah Hub for Teens. This interactive programming brings together North Shore teens for a series of evening dinners, discussions, and hands-on learning throughout the year. Programming has included the “real story” of Hanukkah, Yom Ha’atzmaut programs, and sessions on issues such as homelessness and hunger. Prozdor works with a representative panel of educators and lay leaders from throughout the community to choose the programming topics. **Critically, certain programs offered fulfill synagogue confirmation requirements, helping Torah Hub receive collaboration and buy-in throughout the community.** To ensure that Torah Hub is as accessible as possible, it is held in a central North Shore location.

### Basic Programming Principles

NSTI’s programming evolution was not a clear, linear path. It was defined more by flexibility and experimentation—and valuable partnerships. Certain basic principles—also discussed in detail in the Jim Joseph Foundation’s report, *Effective Strategies for Educating and Engaging Jewish Teens*—have emerged that can inform any community’s model adaptation.

**Empower teens** From event planning to recruiting friends to program implementation, teens want to be empowered. They develop leadership skills because they have a sense of ownership in the initiative and, subsequently, Jewish activities in the community are a reflection of the Jewish experiences that teens *want*. It is important to establish a core of teens actively involved in design, leadership, and promotion of activities.

**Ask teens for input** Learn directly from teens about what programming works, what is most desired, and what can be improved.

**No membership fee** Since the NSTI model is not premised on membership, there is no fee to “join.” Moving away from a youth group model solely affiliated with one denomination, in which families have to pay in advance, has been key for NSTI’s teen engagement—particularly in reaching lesser-engaged or unaffiliated teens. In NSTI’s model, families assume no risk by having teens try one activity in which *they* want to engage.

**Offer flexible schedule and participation** Meet teens where they are, which is likely outside institutional walls, and offer different degrees of involvement.

**Provide a menu of program options** While a synagogue, for example, might have difficulty offering camp, sports, arts, learning, prayer, leadership training, volunteerism, and other opportunities, the NSTI model makes it possible for a teen to select from all of these options. By serving as the connective tissue, NSTI brings community offerings together, seemingly in one place.

**Directly facilitate participation** NSTI essentially became the reason why events *could* happen. By budgeting money for transportation, for example, NSTI solved prior problems relating to program proximity and access. These types of strategies are again direct ways to demonstrate value-added.





## Spreading the Word through Effective Marketing

Reaching North Shore families and teens

As with other components of this model, NSTI developed its marketing through trial and error. NSTI today understands which strategies are most effective to both 1) reach the unaffiliated or under-engaged and 2) stay in contact with teens who already have participated in one NSTI event. This section of the model presents different components of marketing, from NSTI's inception to date.

### Building a Database

Without a teen audience, there is no NSTI. But once the Board and staff of NSTI were in place, an immediate NSTI teens database did not simply appear. Thus, during the first year spent listening and building relationships, staff, board members, and other lay leaders worked tirelessly to develop a list of teen names and contact information.

They all phoned synagogues and other organizations to inquire about sharing lists and trying to identify families who had teenage children. Board members and other lay leaders leveraged relationships to acquire names and contact information. Often the lists existed only as hard copies—not on a computer and not organized in any fashion. By piecing together different lists, NSTI slowly developed a database of Jewish teens in the North Shore.

### Traditional Advertising

Since its first year, NSTI has purchased advertising inserts in *The Jewish Journal*, the Jewish newspaper devoted to covering the North Shore. NSTI first purchased space for a bi-monthly insert, known as *J-Shore North*, and today purchases the space quarterly. This reaches teens, parents, and lay leaders—and initially helped to establish NSTI as a collaborative partner that worked to promote organizations' events. It also helped to underscore that NSTI had its finger on the pulse of the full range of North Shore Jewish programming.

While the insert is organized by NSTI, the content is written by teens and covers events from a variety of youth groups, schools, and organizations. Teens share their experiences, explaining why they had fun or what they learned. Teens not only take ownership of recapping and explaining events, but their authorship ensures that it is peer-to-peer marketing.



### High Standards for Marketing

Busy families and tech-savvy teens expect certain standards regarding marketing or registration for programs. This is true in the secular world—be it sporting events or school activities—and this is true in the Jewish world as well. Any program in which NSTI is involved has seamless online registration and payment forms. All relevant program details are presented in one place. The audience has quick, easy access to information in every type of online platform.

### Accurate and Up-to-Date Website

The website was a key tactic for cultivating relationships. By promoting any Jewish organization and event on its website, NSTI demonstrated its intent to help the entire scope of North Shore Jewish teen engagement. As more families and teens were introduced to NSTI—either through events or friends or simply word of mouth—having a modern website, with updated program and calendar information, was critical. This allowed NSTI to build trust with its audience. People knew and continue to know that NSTI's website houses accurate and current information.

### Different Communications for Different Audiences

In 2009, as NSTI came on the scene, social media had become a focal point in the lives of many teens. NSTI recognized the possibilities of reaching teens directly and spoke with them to understand how they were using these tools and solicited their input on how to set up NSTI's social media presence. While email was effective in reaching parents, that message would be accompanied by a Facebook post or text message to teens. This enabled teens to interact with the organization and staff and to organically share upcoming events or pictures from past events with their friends.

For NSTI, Facebook proved and continues to prove to be an important way to reach teens, gain credibility as a fun organization, and expand NSTI's network. But Facebook and other social media are ever-evolving. Any community adapting this model must strategize about their best uses and understand the current social media tools and options.



## Sustaining and Growing

Preparing the initiative for success beyond the pilot years

### Importance of Development

After the initial grant period (at the end of the 2014 fiscal year), NSTI will be essentially “on its own.” Just as other aspects of NSTI have built towards this moment, so too has its fundraising strategies.

The table on the opposite page shows the annual NSTI budget breakdown. As NSTI’s budget has increased modestly to \$400,000, its own fundraising has increased modestly as well. **By having the flexibility to not delve seriously into fundraising until the fourth year, NSTI had the “gift” of time. It built those key relationships, introduced new events, and connected with teens and parents all without the burden of development hanging over the initiative.** Along with the other elements of this model, this approach to fundraising should be carefully considered by other communities.

The Jim Joseph Foundation’s grantmaking strategy with NSTI, as with almost all grants, was implemented with an eye toward sustainability; NSTI understood this from day one. As a result, in the last three years, NSTI has gradually devoted more time to development efforts. This continues to be a learning process for all involved. But, whether soliciting families or other local funders, NSTI now can demonstrate value-added to the community when it goes for an “ask.” These fundraising targets most likely have seen NSTI’s impact in the community.

So while this new era for NSTI in some ways is daunting, at the same time it represents an opportunity to further cultivate relationships. NSTI will become a permanent part of North Shore teen Jewish life only with the buy-in—in the true sense of the word—from the community that it serves.

### Maintenance and Measurement

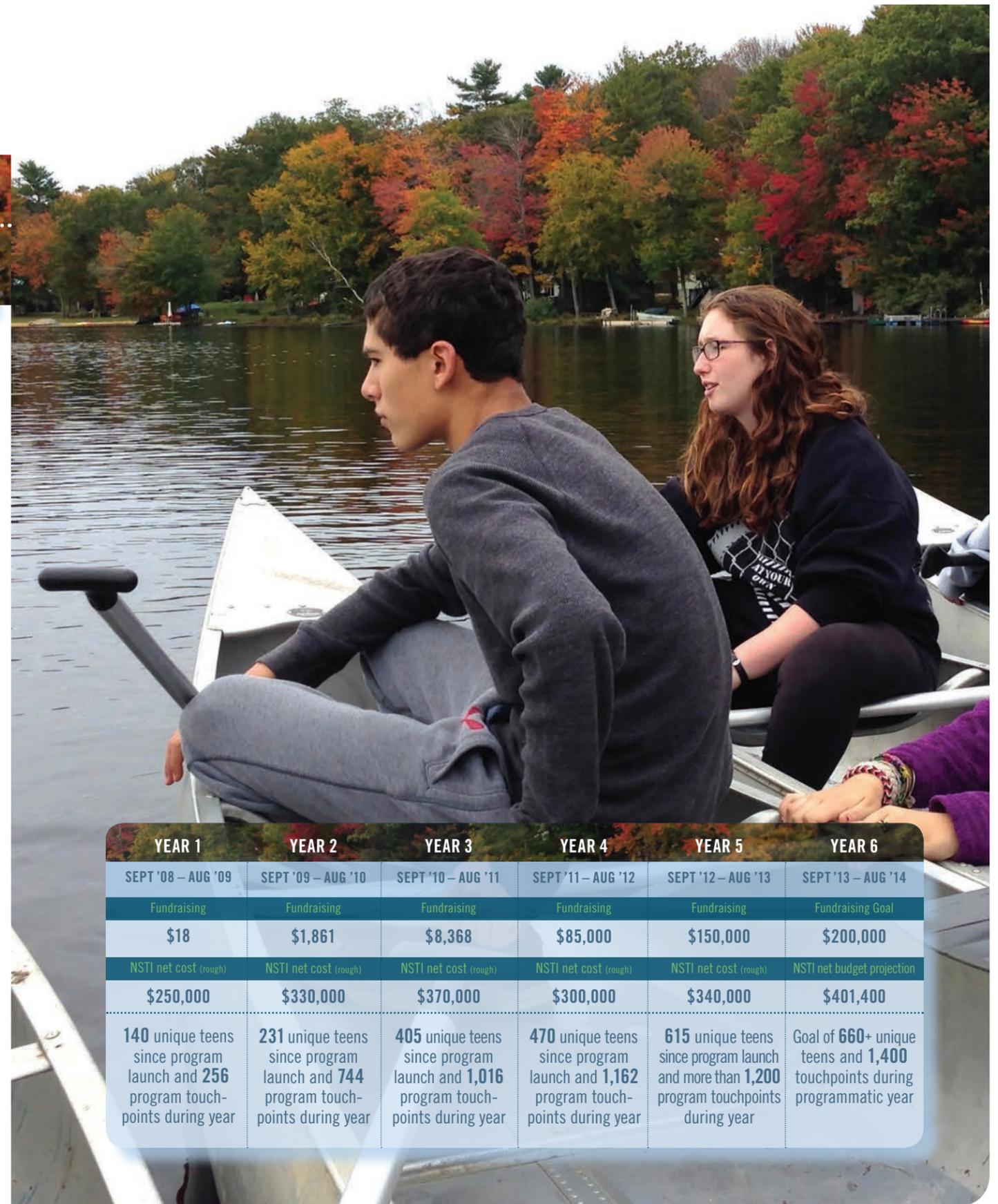
The need for NSTI to raise funds also highlights the need for any community to gather as much information as possible about teens and their families from the earliest days of the model’s implementation. In the process of transitioning toward sustainability, NSTI has had independent evaluation and continual, internal evaluation for self-improvement. No one will provide a serious contribution without an understanding of the population served by NSTI and whether NSTI has successfully met outcomes.

Research conducted early is beneficial in this area. NSTI recognizes now that measuring community attitudes and behaviors before the program began would have been helpful. Similarly, determining the benchmark of community participation that justifies the initiative’s continuation helps all stakeholders understand the likelihood of sustainability. So, too, does assessing parental and community support for ongoing and long-term efforts.

Equally as important is meeting the challenge of a dynamic audience. The North Shore’s population of teens naturally changes every year as teens graduate and move away. The need always exists to identify and reach new cohorts. With these factors in mind, certain information is helpful to track, including:

- Teens by graduation year
- Teens who participate (versus those simply on the list)
- In which events teens participate
- Teens by town/community
- Teens by grade level
- Teens by synagogue
- Family pledge/contribution
- Family relationships—siblings and parents (email) since they become a separate marketing target audience

This information relates directly to programmatic outreach, but it has fundraising implications as well. Tracking this census-type data helps to determine which families may be willing to give because their teens are currently involved.



YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3	YEAR 4	YEAR 5	YEAR 6
SEPT '08 – AUG '09	SEPT '09 – AUG '10	SEPT '10 – AUG '11	SEPT '11 – AUG '12	SEPT '12 – AUG '13	SEPT '13 – AUG '14
Fundraising	Fundraising	Fundraising	Fundraising	Fundraising	Fundraising Goal
\$18	\$1,861	\$8,368	\$85,000	\$150,000	\$200,000
NSTI net cost (rough)	NSTI net cost (rough)	NSTI net cost (rough)	NSTI net cost (rough)	NSTI net cost (rough)	NSTI net budget projection
\$250,000	\$330,000	\$370,000	\$300,000	\$340,000	\$401,400
140 unique teens since program launch and 256 program touch-points during year	231 unique teens since program launch and 744 program touch-points during year	405 unique teens since program launch and 1,016 program touch-points during year	470 unique teens since program launch and 1,162 program touch-points during year	615 unique teens since program launch and more than 1,200 program touchpoints during year	Goal of 660+ unique teens and 1,400 touchpoints during programmatic year



## Concluding Thoughts

Sharing the model to help other communities

We hope that this model documentation is an asset for any community trying to increase its Jewish teen engagement. With this report, individuals have insights into NSTI's successes, challenges, and overall process. As such, they are more informed to make the smart decisions for their Jewish communities. That does not necessarily equate to replication of this model simply because it is successful in the North Shore of Boston. Yet, adaptation of the model, or adaptation of certain elements of the model, may be a part of that "answer" for Jewish teen engagement.

We also recognize that NSTI does not encompass every potential Jewish teen engagement strategy. For example, NSTI does not offer Israel travel and day school scholarships, or offer professional development for local youth directors. But that should not dissuade communities from considering these and other opportunities. Every community has distinct circumstances—and different communities may find that "answer" in different ways.

Our story began six years ago when we assessed the North Shore Jewish community and determined there was an opportunity. We had a vision of creating more Jewish experiences for teens, but did not know what that vision would be like in practice. Other community leaders, too, may be unsure about which kinds of programming will be most effective if they choose to move forward. And that is okay. By developing relationships, fostering collaboration, and helping all Jewish community programs and organizations, community leaders can build the foundation for a successful Jewish teen engagement initiative. With the lessons and experiences of NSTI now detailed, we hope that interested communities across the country will be able to use this information as they seek to set up their own community-wide initiatives to engage more Jewish teens in meaningful Jewish experiences.

They have made all kinds of conversations possible, brokered new partnerships, and brought the different pieces of the community together. NSTI is the way of the future.

**Rabbi Baruch HaLevi, Congregation Shirat Hayam, Swampscott, MA**



343 Sansome Street, Suite 550  
San Francisco, CA 94104-5623  
[www.jimjosephfoundation.org](http://www.jimjosephfoundation.org)  
T 415.658.8730 F 415.658.8736