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## **Oakland activist 'cornerstone' of Jewish community**

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Julie Iny became an activist when she still had recess.

As a third-grader in Los Angeles County, she joined Hashomer Hatzair, a Zionist youth group focused on social justice and Judaism. The older teens in the youth group encouraged their waist-high counterparts to think and talk about the world around them, to not ignore the inequality that persisted in Los Angeles' neighborhoods and schools.

"Because I was taken seriously as a young person, I know we can never underestimate what young people can do in their schools and communities," she said.

Iny, 35, has since dedicated her career to empowering teens a generation behind her. She works as the associate director for Oakland Kids First, an agency that supports in- and after-school programming for low-income minority teens. Kids First focuses on social justice, advocacy and leadership.

Iny is motivated by her Jewish faith and values. However, because she doesn't work for a Jewish organization, she is seldom labeled a Jewish leader.

But last month, Iny and three others won the inaugural Cornerstone Award, given by the N.Y.-based Jewish Funds for Justice.

"We started these awards because we believe there are hundreds, thousands of Jews who have chosen to work at social change organizations as an expression of their Jewish identity but who are not recognized by the Jewish community for the work they're doing because they're not working within the community," said Mik Moore, a spokesman for Jewish Funds.

Iny and the other award winners (who hail from Brooklyn and Nashville) will receive \$10,000 grants. Three-fourths of the grant goes to help support their organizations. Winners can use the remaining fourth for professional development. For Iny, that means taking a film class so she can make a

documentary about Kids First, and perhaps later about her father, [an Iraqi Jew](#) who grew up in India.

Iny cites her family as a big influence. Her grandfather was a grocer in a poor, black section of East St. Louis, Ill., where he also raised his children and taught Iny's mother to fight inequality. The message Iny's mother passed on to her was: "Being Jewish gives us a responsibility to stand up to the inequality of all groups, to never be silent about anti-Semitism or racism," Iny said.

Kids First, where Iny has worked since 2001, introduces Oakland teens to community organizing and activism. The staff of the nonprofit agency — including Iny — believes young people must be centrally involved in the policies that affect them.

"Young people tend to work well with Julie," said Greg Hodge, an Oakland School Board member who has known Iny since the mid-1990s.

"She respects them, respects what they think. She's got a sense you've got to give young people room to grow, to make mistakes. [Teens] respond to that."

Recently, Iny helped teens at Oakland high schools create and implement a solution to the district's untenable ratio of guidance counselors to students. According to the Oakland Education Association, each guidance counselor is responsible for between 400 and 700 students, an unworkable ratio for any school district, especially one with Oakland's dropout rate. A 2005 study found that only 48 out of 100 students graduate from an Oakland high school.

"The kids are in school every day. They are aware that their peers are dropping out, that very few will go to four-year colleges," Iny said. "Who better to weigh in than young people themselves?"

With Kids First support, the teens thought up a peer-counseling program that pairs juniors and seniors with freshmen and sophomores, so the younger students get more help with their academics. It will be implemented in the spring.

Kids First also worked with teens to lobby for more affordable bus passes and city funding for youth programming.

"What's most gratifying for me is watching young people develop as leaders and see them learn they are capable of more than they thought," she said.

Dereka Williams, 20 and a student at the S.F. Academy of Art University, met Iny through Kids First in 2004. They worked together on the bus fare campaign.

"Just being in high school in Oakland is hard, period," she said. "I was going through so many different life-changing things. I had a hard housing situation, a parent situation. Julie was one of the only adults I really did trust. I didn't talk to any adults except for her."

Iny said the relationships she builds with teens motivate her as much as her Jewish identity. She sees herself as a Jewish leader, albeit in an untraditional way.

“I’d encourage our community to think about how we support Jews doing activism outside of the Jewish community, and more importantly, how we support that activism,” she said.