



FAST lead organizer Haley Grossman is shown with Rev. Walter Campbell of Bayview Baptist Church and Rev. Joe Diaz, rector of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, both in Clearwater. Here they are preparing for a FAST organized rally earlier this year, which drew over 2,000 people and almost a dozen public officials. A focus was the need for affordable public housing.

Local young Jewish woman picked for national social justice award

By MELINDA GREENE
Jewish Press

Haley Grossman, 32, of St. Petersburg, lead organizer for the group FAST (Faith and Action for Strength Together), is a soft-spoken young woman who shuns the limelight. Despite the reluctance to toot her own horn, this granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, has managed to garner national recognition for doing something she loves.

On May 29, she will travel to New York to receive one of the Jewish Funds for Justice's (JFSJ) second annual Cornerstone Awards, a citation which will be given this year

to four young Jews who work for organizations that promote economic justice, public policy, civil rights and prison issues.

The awards are given to those under 35 years of age whom JFSJ believes embrace Jewish values that guide them in their chosen careers. According to JFSJ organizers, this year's honorees, who live in New York, Maryland and Florida, were selected from a pool of 85 applicants.

Although she answered the call for applications, Grossman never thought she would be one of the

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winner, "I was surprised and honored," she said.

Each winner will receive a grant of \$10,000. Twenty five percent of the grant is to be used for their personal professional development while 75 percent is to go toward their respective organizations.

Grossman's reluctance to talk about herself is such that she didn't even tell her "mentor" Rabbi Arthur Baseman of Temple B'nai Israel in Clearwater that she had won. Temple B'nai Israel is one of the founding congregations of FAST.

Rabbi Baseman said Grossman mentioned nothing to him about winning the Cornerstone Award even though he had met with her after she knew.

Describing Grossman, the rabbi said, "Haley is passionate about her work, she's tenacious and well organized, and determined to make a difference."

Raised in Newton, MA, Grossman credits her parents with instilling in her a strong sense of social justice, a sense that all people regardless of race, religion, or social status, deserve to be treated fairly and justly.

"My father taught me right from wrong, and my mother taught me that my Jewish faith is an active faith, not passive and that you didn't have to go to synagogue to worship to do what's right," said Grossman.

She also recalls watching the news with my grandmother when a boatload of Haitians trying to land in Florida were sent back. "My grandmother said how wrong that was and that she could relate to it because that's what it was like for her (during the Holocaust) when she was on a boat when she was trying to enter the United States, and they were sending Jews away."

Grossman came to Florida in 1993 so she could spend more time with her grandparents in West Palm Beach as well as to attend

New College in Sarasota where she earned a degree in urban studies in 1998.

Following graduation, Grossman went to Daytona Beach where she worked for three years for a group known as FAITH (Fighting Against Injustice Towards Harmony) — an organization with an agenda similar to that of FAST in that it promotes and attempts to resolve many of the issues that affect the poorer communities.

She eventually moved back to Boston for a time, but decided she wanted to return to Florida. She moved to Pinellas County in late 2003 and was subsequently hired as lead coordinator for FAST at its inception in 2004.

FAST is a grassroots organization that consists of 32 local congregations, overwhelmingly Christian, representing more than 50,000 residents. Temples B'nai Israel in Clearwater and Beth-El in St. Petersburg are thus far the only two Pinellas County synagogues in the group.

The major goal of FAST is to hold elected officials accountable on such issues as poverty and crime while giving a loud, insistent voice to the poor, the elderly and children at-risk.

Grossman works, as she describes it, "behind the scenes." She recruits congregations for the organization and trains clergy in effective organizational techniques.

She also serves as a recruiter and mentor of young organizers for the FAST program through a nationwide program called DART or Direct Action and Research Training Center — of which she says proudly, "We are training the next generation of organizers who are going to transform our communities."



An example of Haley Grossman's work: On April 7, more than 2,400 people from congregations throughout Pinellas County attended the FAST Nehemiah Action program. The rally was held to hold local officials accountable on issues related to affordable housing, education and crime.

One of the major hurdles FAST faces, she says, is "getting city officials and powerful people in the community to envision the world as it could be — a community that is more fair and just."

"Haley is doing fantastic work here in the community," says Rabbi Michael Torop of Temple Beth-El.

He says he was somewhat skeptical at first about getting his congregation involved with FAST, due mainly to the group's self-identification as a "social justice 'ministry'," a term that "does not always resonate well with the Jewish community."

That initial skepticism, he says, was soon dissolved by Grossman's ability to translate FAST's message and language into a "Jewish context."

"She has a soft yet insistent approach," Rabbi Torop added.

Grossman also acknowledges that the Jewish community appears to be seeking greater involvement in multi-faith organizations that focus on matters that are not the exclusive province of Jews and Judaism.

"If we want people to support the Jewish community when we are in need, we have to also be willing to support other communities in addressing their needs," says Grossman.

"The Jewish religion is so rich with calls to do justice with the reminder that we were once slaves and now are free. Once a year we remind ourselves of the Exodus and what we came through," says Grossman, adding that the message and celebration of Passover was always very important in her family.

To illustrate this, she points to contemporary society, in which the poor often are "enslaved", as she calls it, by a criminal justice system that doesn't offer a lot of opportunities for rehabilitation or by unfair credit practices because they do not have bank accounts and so must fork over a large percentage of money to check cashing services and pawn shops.

Grossman says one of the most rewarding aspects of her job with FAST is working with a diverse group of people. "I can't believe I get paid to do this work."

As well, she points to the accomplishments recognized by the organization in the span of only a few years such as securing funding for full-day pre-kindergarten programs for lower income families, in addition to having obtained the support of the Pinellas County Commission to set up a trust fund for affordable housing, which to date includes the creation of 700 new units for families making less than \$42,000 a year.

FAST gets its funding from its individual congregations, which pay dues equal to one percent of their operating budget, in addition to seeking financial support from individual donors.