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## New organization supports Jewish education

By FRANCES KRAFT, Staff Reporter

Thursday, 10 January 2008

TORONTO — Michael Ettedgui has founded an organization to support formal and informal Jewish education in a variety of countries, beginning with Bolivia, Colombia and Uruguay. He is also investigating needs in other Latin American countries, the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa.



Inspired in part by the memory of his late grandfather – Marcos Soberano, a strong proponent of Jewish and secular education – Ettedgui named the organization Yaldeinu: The Marcos Soberano Society for Jewish Education and Camping.

Soberano died in 2005, 41 years after emigrating from Tangiers with his wife and 10 children (an 11th would be born in Canada).

Ettedgui, a 26-year-old resident of Thornhill who attended Or Haemet

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Michael Etedgui and Susana Soloducho, director of Montevideo's Escuela Integral Hebreo Uruguay, on Etedgui's recent trip to South America.

Sephardic School until Grade 3, has always wanted to work in the Jewish community, he said in a recent interview.

After receiving his BA in political science from York University, Etedgui worked as an education associate for the Toronto-based Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre for Holocaust Studies. He continues to consult for them on a freelance basis, but his main focus now is Yaldeinu. The name is Hebrew for "Our Children."

Yaldeinu is a registered non-profit corporation, and Etedgui is working on attaining charitable status for it. For now, he runs it single-handedly out of a donated office at the business premises of a relative of his.

The organization's annual budget is "in the six figures," Etedgui said. The exact amount for its second year will be determined by fundraising, which is set to begin in the next few months.

The new organization, which Etedgui conceived of six months ago and founded in October, is funded by a small group of local philanthropists.

Among the factors contributing to Etedgui's idea was his strong belief "that education – formal and informal – is the key to the continuity of the Jewish people, and that if we don't invest in education of our children now, then future generations will be ill equipped to lead our community."

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Also, he credits the traditional Moroccan Jewish community in which he was raised, and his work for three summers at Camp Torolago, a Jewish overnight camp that hosts Israeli victims of terror. Etedgui's involvement in bringing the Israeli campers here helped him realize the importance of assisting young people as well as the importance of informal Jewish education, he said.

As an undergraduate spending a year at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, he led a mission to Ukraine and Moscow to bring the Passover seder to Jews there, another experience that had an impact on him.

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After some initial research for Yaldeinu, Ettedgui concluded that there “seems to be a void of international funding dedicated to Jewish education in Latin American communities.”

Last month, Ettedgui, who speaks Spanish fluently, visited Montevideo, La Paz and Bogota to meet with Jewish community leaders and see for himself the situation in each city.

In Montevideo, which has a Jewish population of about 15,000, there are two Jewish schools. A third closed its doors recently, and about 70 per cent of Jewish day school students receive tuition assistance, said Ettedgui.

The Jewish community in La Paz is down to 200 people, Ettedgui said. There is a Jewish school, but only a handful of the 300 students are Jewish, he added. There are also Jewish children who don’t attend the school, but there is a supplementary school in the community.

“It’s the kind of community where little sums of money will go a long way,” he said. He is looking at bringing about 10 children between ages 11 and 14, and one madrich (leader), to summer camp from La Paz.

Yaldeinu is partnering with La Paz’ Circulo Israelita, which oversees Jewish education there. Ettedgui plans to send Spanish language teaching materials there, and bring local children to Canadian summer camps including Torolago.

Bogota, which has one Jewish school serving 275 students in a Jewish population of about 2,000, has a “very connected Jewish community, but with a hard-hit middle class,” said Ettedgui. He plans to provide tuition scholarships and pedagogic materials to them.

Having visited the communities himself, he said he feels “an urgent responsibility to make good and help” them.

He also plans to bring Israeli children to camps here, and plans to put donors and recipients in contact where possible. “We want to create lasting relationships between Jewish people the world over.

“Yaldeinu will go wherever there’s a need, and that we can afford.”

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