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Orlando bar mitzvah project aids Israeli Scouts

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A separation involving 5,000 miles, different continents, an ocean and a culture can make it difficult to know people's needs.

But 13-year-old Cameron Collins of Orlando has managed to bridge the distance and is helping a group in Israel as part of his bar mitzvah, or coming-of-age ceremony.

A community-service project is required to complete the ceremony, to help instill a fundamental belief of the Jewish culture tikkun olum, which translates to "healing the world."

Cameron, whose bar mitzvah was April 5 at the Southwest Orlando Jewish Congregation, where he attends, started thinking about his project almost a year ago.

A Boy Scout of five years, he decided to think outside the box and outside the United States. He chose to raise money and supplies for a Scout troop, referred to as a shevet, in Yeruham, Israel.

"I figured since I am a Scout and they are Scouts, I should help them out," said Cameron, a seventh-grader at Gotha Middle School.

Cameron and his father, Brian Collins, reached out to the Friends of Israeli Scouts, based in New York, to help find a troop in need. At first the group was surprised at the outreach, Collins said.

"It is a big surprise when you think about the nature of the project for someone his age," he added.

Shevet Rechasim responded, and a list of needs rolled in: tents, kayaks, paint for boats, ropes and a computer.

The co-ed troop of about 80 children lives near a lake in the desert. The group is affiliated with the Israeli Navy and focuses primarily on sea Scouting and helping the Scouts develop their boating skills.

Cameron set out to collect the supplies, only to find that the road of humanitarian work is not easy.

"We have had trouble getting some of the big-ticket items -- like the kayaks," Collins said.

So far, Cameron has collected three tents, donated from the Bass Pro Shop. He also is selling \$1 raffle tickets to help generate money for the items not donated. So far he has received gift certificates from several restaurants and a book chain to include in the raffle.

He remains optimistic.

"I think I am on a good track," he said. "I have to sell about 1,000 tickets to reach my goal, and so far I have sold about 200 -- almost there."

His optimism and willingness to help has spread all the way to Israel.

In an e-mail, Yosi Rouper, the troop leader in Israel, writes: "Cameron's project has touched the lives of many children participating in the Shevet Rechasim Scouts. The project has allowed the community to see how important it is for the kids in the Scouts to have a second home and how important is it to volunteer, to contribute to someone else."

That's a lesson Cameron has learned. "Look at the world around you -- it is not a perfect place," he said. "There are many

more people out there in need than you think."

In June, Cameron will be able to put faces to the names he has been helping. His family is taking a trip to Israel to personally deliver the supplies.

"I have been learning a lot about what they do in their daily lives -- what time they go to school, what they eat -- it has been really cool," Cameron said. "I am so happy I am going to get to actually go and meet them."

Cameron has plans to hike with the shevet up Masada -- the rock cliff overlooking the Dead Sea that is the site of a Jewish fortress that was besieged by the Romans in the first century A.D.

Also while in Israel, Cameron and his family will have a small ceremony commemorating his bar mitzvah at the Western Wall, along with a speedboat ride on the Red Sea, a visit to Roman ruins and a camel ride.

It has been a project -- and will be a trip -- sure to last Cameron a lifetime.

"I plan to keep in contact with them even after this," he said.

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