

Temple Israel teens attend conference Students voice views at public policy meeting

By Carolyn McAtee Cerbin, Special to The Commercial Appeal
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WASHINGTON -- Classmates noticed something a little different about Jeremy Kahn this week.

He left his hair -- all of it -- in Washington.

The Ridgeway High School junior, traveling with fellow Temple Israel members to a Reformed Judaism conference earlier this week, embraced early the group's goal of Tikun Olan (rough Hebrew translation: repair the world). Kahn donated his locks to Buzzing for Change during a childhood cancer benefit at George Washington University, one of three colleges the students toured to witness Jewish campus life.

Rabbi Micah Greenstein wants everyone to know, though, that before Kahn bared his scalp, he phoned his mom for permission.

Over the past 18 years, Greenstein, senior rabbi of Temple Israel, has led nine groups of high school students to participate in the biennial Consultation on Conscience, a public policy conference hosted by the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism, the legislative arm of the Union for Reform Judaism.

The students hear leaders of the day -- for instance, Larry Summers, President Obama's economic guru, spoke Sunday night -- then they present views on various topics ranging from education to health care before elected officials from the Mid-South.

The students -- with 36 juniors and seniors from nine Memphis-area high schools, the contingent was the largest at the conference -- didn't know which topic they'd tackle before arriving in Washington. Once assigned, the students broke into groups to prepare 3-minute speeches to give lawmakers.

Some students whipped out their iPhones to research their topics, but Matthew Ashner, a senior at White Station High School, relied on a discussion he had with a professor at Washington University in St. Louis -- his choice for college in the fall -- to inform his group's report on the environment.

Being able to meet with the likes of Republican Sen. Bob Corker -- who spent 45 minutes listening and responding to the group Monday afternoon while his next visitors chilled in his anteroom -- "was such a different feeling from being in Memphis," said Hillary Weiss, who attends Lausanne Collegiate School.

Greenstein said bringing students to the nation's capital and empowering them to be leaders "is one of the most rewarding things I do as a rabbi."



Members of Temple Israel's high school department visited the office of Sen. Blanche Lambert Lincoln, D-Ark., on Capitol Hill this week, presenting their views on various topics, such as education and health care reform. The trip was organized by Temple Israel's Senior Rabbi Micah Greenstein.