

Bar mitzvah inspires a gift of school supplies to Haitian orphanage



Josh Arbess, pictured at his family's home, raised nearly \$25,000 for backpacks filled with school supplies and other needs at an orphanage in Haiti, a more meaningful alternative than the usual dance party. (ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE / TORONTO STAR)

By **DEBRA BLACK** Immigration Reporter

A Toronto teen plans to spend the first few days of the New Year with his father in Haiti, distributing school supplies to students at an orphanage southeast of Port-au-Prince, which was just 12 kilometres from the epicentre of the 2010 earthquake.

The trip will culminate his efforts to do something “meaningful” in honour of his bar mitzvah.

Josh Arbess, a 13-year-old at Leo Baeck Day School, raised almost \$25,000 by asking everyone who attended his bar mitzvah earlier this year to make a donation to [Ve’ahavta](#) — the Canadian Jewish Humanitarian and Relief Project.

The idea was to use a portion of the money to buy 1,000 Kinder Kits — backpacks with school supplies — to be shipped and distributed at the House of Hope orphanage at the beginning of Janaury.

The rest of the money will be used to buy tablet computers and other things the orphanage needs once Arbess and his father, Gordon, a family physician at St. Michael’s Hospital, arrive in Haiti. They plan to consult the orphanage director about what is needed most.

When Arbess began planning his bar mitzvah he knew from the start he didn’t want an “over-the-top” dance party to celebrate.

He wanted to do something more meaningful, something to truly celebrate the humanitarian values he’d been brought up with — and the values of tzedakah (charitable giving as a moral obligation) central to Judaism and in keeping with becoming a bar mitzvah boy.

“Dance parties aren’t really my thing,” he explained in an interview with the Star. “I wanted to do something more.”

“If you can afford to have a party, I don’t think a child really needs x amount of money in gifts, when they are already perfectly well-off.”

So after consulting with his father and Ve’ahavta, he came up with the idea of donating monetary gifts to the purchase of school supplies for House of Hope, which was founded in 1990 by an expatriate Haitian then living in the United States.

To explain, he built a [website](#) describing the project to friends and family.

“I am so excited to be celebrating this milestone with you all,” he wrote. “It means so much to celebrate becoming a Bar-Mitzvah with my closest friends and family. I have decided to have a different kind of Bar-Mitzvah celebration.

“I have met an incredible woman by the name of Alice Barthole, who founded an orphanage in Gressier, Haiti, called La Maison D’espoir, or House of Hope,” he continued.

“Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. With her encouragement, I have decided to support the kids of the orphanage by sending educational supplies. At the event, we will all assemble backpacks filled with notebooks, pens, paper, etc.

“In the spirit of my Bar-Mitzvah, I am hoping to make a difference in the lives of others.”

On Sept. 8, Josh and friends spent part of the evening celebrations packing the school supplies and writing individual notes to children who would get the backpacks. He hopes others will follow his lead and do similar projects.

“I think he’s very inspiring, for sure,” his father, Gordon, told the Star. “He has been thinking about these things for many years. He’s always been very sensitive to others and volunteered his time. Anyone who knows him is blown away by him. Not to boast, but he’s just a very good kid. Humble and quiet.”