Birthright Excel means business

Summer program matches promising students with leading Israeli businesses

By NIV ELIS

Under the watchful eye of Theodor Herzl, whose statue overlooks the hall at Bank Leumi Bet Mani House in Tel Aviv, 36 young adults from America’s leading universities bristled with excitement on Thursday night as they met their summer sponsors from the nation’s leading companies for the first time.

Selected from 2,500 applicants, the students comprising the third class of Birthright Israel’s Excel program represent what the Charles and Lynn Schusterman and the Steinhardt Family foundations deem to be the future of American-Israeli business ties.

“I’m certain that this program will be a profound experience in your life, will deepen your ties with Israel, and most importantly will preserve your Jewish identity,” Bank Leumi chairman David Brodet told the young crowd.

The programe which the Schusterman Foundation’s Israel director David Gappel described as “probably the most exclusive and expensive” in its field (but “not in a Jewish guilty kind of way”) — pairs students with leading companies in Israel, such as Tnuva, Check Point, Ness Technologies, Citibank and Israel Corp. for a 10-week internship.

To strengthen their social and business ties with Israel, the students are also matched with Israeli student sponsors from the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya or with IDF soldiers.

But that’s just part of the ambitious program. During their time here, the participants will meet with an impressive array of executives and officials, from Finance Minister Yair Lapid to Google Israel CEO Meir Brand. Upon returning home, they will be paired with a career mentor to help them advance, and reconvene in New York for a reunion summit next winter.

Monica Sager, a 19-year-old Washington University of St. Louis student from Florida, decided to apply for the program after taking a course on Israeli entrepreneurship.

“I grew up semi-religious, so it was interesting to see a different perspective,” she says, adding that she hopes the program will help her develop relationships with corporate leaders and more fully understand Israeli business practices.

Amdocs’s Tal Munk Weisleder, who will supervise Sager this summer, says the company plans serious projects for her.

“We’re going to have her research post-merger integration. It’s a very large field, integrating other companies into Amdocs, and we really want to know how do other companies do it, what can we learn about it, so I hope Monica will be able to help us with that,” she says.

Sager will also learn how to work in a global corporate environment, Weisleder adds, dealing with issues in places as diverse as Norway, India and China.

Gil Golan, who directs General Electric’s Advanced Techni-cal Center in Haifa, says he is still in touch with last summer’s intern, a Yale University student. He expects equally good work this year from Ben Gittles, one of several Excel Fellows from the University of Pennsylvania (of which, incidentally, Birthright funder Michael Steinhardt is a graduate).

Though more limited in scope than the free 10-day Birthright Israel tour groups, the Excel program maintains the basic goal of strengthening Diaspora Jewry’s connection to Israel through direct exposure.

“There are so many ways to define yourself as a Jew,” says Aderet Ashkenazi, an Israeli psychology student at IDC who will participate in the program as a student sponsor.

“Today I realize that the most powerful thing we have is the connection to Israel.”