

NEW YORK

Twin Titans of Stuyvesant High School

Three years ago, Jack and David Cahn, age 17 and 17, respectively, came to their new school with one mission and one mission only: to conquer it. Success. Now, look out, world.

By **Jada Yuan** Published Nov 17, 2013



Jack and David Cahn.
(Photo: Ryan Pfluger)

Ugh, we're having parent-teacher conferences today, so we had shorter classes and the administration was running the bell schedule manually, but they messed it up every period. It was a disaster," says Jack Cahn, 17, out of breath from power walking to meet me in the second-floor café of the Whole Foods in Tribeca, a few blocks from Stuyvesant High School, where he's currently a senior. This time next year he'll be in college, but for now he's carrying on the tradition of precocious kids everywhere, convinced he knows more than the adults running the most

competitive public high school in New York City. He's about six feet tall and teenage handsome with an easy laugh, a smattering of forehead acne, pubescent stubble, and thick black hair that swoops up, Tintin style, in the front. I scramble to keep up as he briefs me on an endless stream of critically important high-school issues while casing the room in vain for a free table. "I have an idea," Jack announces and plops down without asking at a four-top already occupied by a startled thirtysomething blond man, mid-bite into his sandwich.

Moments later, Jack's identical twin brother, David, appears—same height, same exuberance, similar clothes, different build—so out of breath I ask if he ran here. "No, I'm a quick walker; it's how I get from A to B," David says, perplexed I'd ask, and launches into a story of how he was delayed by a "heated debate" at the end of class about a survey of the entire student body he's helping conduct as co-editor-in-chief of the student newspaper, the Stuyvesant *Spectator*. "[A student-body-wide survey]'s been done, like, three times in the school's history. No one does them," says David, grinning. "It's very controversial because I'm quantifying drug use, sex, cheating, and homework. Somehow, I got this past the administration." This is very much a Cahn brothers special: Cause a ruckus, write about the ruckus, promote the

ruckus, get outside media to cover the ruckus as if it's a ruckus that deserves attention beyond Stuyvesant's walls.

"We're very *in* the controversy," says David.

"We create it," says Jack.

David and his fellow editors will eventually decide not to include the sex questions, but the effort adds another layer to the legend of the Cahn twins' irrepressible pluck. Four years ago, when they felt they'd reached the academic ceiling of the Ramaz School, a private modern-Orthodox yeshiva on the Upper East Side, they decided to try testing into Stuyvesant, which has the highest cutoff score for the entrance exam of the city's nine specialized public high schools. Their mission: Divide and conquer. And they've mostly conquered. Jack is in student government, David got the newspaper; plus, they're a formidable debate team and passionate agitators for a variety of causes. They have A averages; study Mandarin (they also speak Hebrew and Spanish); have lobbied successfully to audit a class during their lunch period and audited several others at New York Law School on their own time; have held national positions with the Junior State of America; are Huffington Post columnists; were intern supervisors for Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney; and have started a business, Guerrilla Joe, selling ad space on the sides of coffee carts throughout the city. Last year, they even squeezed in time for girlfriends.

They're incredibly easy to spot in the Stuyvesant hallways; the school has a largely Asian student population, and the Cahns are two of the only students among 3,300 who wear yarmulkes every day. They credit their notoriety, in part, to the "natural advantage of being 'the Jewish twins,'" says David. "By the third day of school, I would say that we were probably the single-most-identifiable people in our entire grade of 800." Two months into being at Stuy, they ran for president and vice-president of the freshman class—"The last time we'll ever run together," says Jack, because it negates the advantage of having a running mate with a different voter base. The election didn't get them power, but it did make them known. Jack says they had more posters up in the school than all the other fifteen tickets combined. "Everybody saw our faces."

More Stuy kids are streaming into Whole Foods, and Jack greets each he recognizes with a wave and a smile, until his phone rings. "This is Jack," he answers, stepping away.

He comes back having just hired a kid to hand out flyers for Kweiler Prep, an upstart test-prep agency for which he's marketing director.

"It's not for the money," says Jack. "Like, what are we gonna do? Sit around?" They had two jobs each this summer; both want to go into business and get law degrees.

I ask if they ever went to the beach.



David Cahn at a Model UN conference in 2012; right, the Stuyvesant *Spectator*, which David co-edits.

(Photo: Courtesy of subjects (David); Bobby Doherty/New York Magazine (paper))

“Sure, the beach is sometimes fine, but I’d much rather be creating something and have something to show for it,” says Jack.

What about summer camp, did they ever do that? “We always disliked camp,” says Jack. “It’s too much, like, downtime.”

The clock strikes 2 p.m. They’re up with a bolt. They don’t mean to be rude, but it’s Friday, and they’ve only got four more hours before sunset to use their cell phones and computers and ride the subway before Sabbath starts. They grab their backpacks and power walk to the Whole Foods exit. Jack’s on his phone, David’s eating as he goes. Soon, all I can see is the long paper wrapper of a Fruit by the Foot snack trailing through the air behind them.

Ask any Stuyvesant faculty member about them and the response is usually “Oh, the Cahns,” with either a loving chuckle or an exasperated eye roll. “Everybody knows them. They’re aggressive guys who get stuff done,” says a Stuy junior I randomly stopped outside school, and at least two thirds of the students I surveyed knew who they were. “They’ve basically organized every protest for the last two years,” says Eric Zhao, another junior. “A lot of kids are not calling attention to themselves in this way or taking such public, dramatic stances,” says a teacher. “Maybe they mutually reinforce each other’s sense of righteous indignation.” They seem to be the kind of alpha overachievers who irk other overachievers. “Yeah, they’re annoying,” says another student.

The Cahns aren’t known just at Stuyvesant, though; they’ve become the school’s de facto representatives to the outside world, to the consternation of many (students, parents, teachers, administrators) who’ve felt burned by the constant press coverage the school’s received in the wake of a 2012 cheating scandal that implicated 66 students for receiving test answers via their smartphones, made the national news, and was linked to the abrupt retirement of then-principal Stanley Teitel. David’s been more recently [quoted in the New York Post](#) in an article about how the cheating debacle has affected the school’s standing. But Jack was the first Cahn to break into the popular imagination, with bloggers and Internet commenters comparing him to *Election*’s Tracy Flick, when at the end of the last school year his fight to be Stuyvesant Student Union president—a fight he ultimately lost—[reached the pages of the New York Times](#).

In that election, Jack won the popular vote but was disqualified for campaign violations, like having too many posters and slandering his opponent on Facebook—all of which he disputed—by the student-run Board of Elections, which he says was stacked with friends of his opponent. He’s still in the Student Union, having reluctantly accepted a position as co-CFO instead. But this summer, from what his

mother tells me, was a difficult one for him in the wake of that loss.

“You have to remember they’re still kids and they’re a work-in-progress, even if they don’t always remember,” says Dina, their mother and a social worker for the city’s Department of Education. “They’re 17, but they think they’re 40.” She’s biked to meet me and the twins after their Mandarin SAT Subject Test, and she’s with their younger brother, Daniel, 14, a freshman at the Ramaz School, who seems more mellow than his brothers (the entire time he’s with us, he never takes off his bike helmet). The twins are crammed onto a bench in a Tribeca coffee shop. David’s furiously writing Chinese characters in a notebook, and Jack’s staring at a computer screen. “I’m running code,” says Jack. “He’s *failing* to run code,” says David.

“David, I hate to sound like a Jewish mother, but where’s your jacket?” says Dina.

David tosses on a hooded sweatshirt he usually has wedged messily between his shoulder and the strap of his overstuffed backpack. Both twins constantly carry every one of their schoolbooks on their backs because neither has a locker. At the start of the year, they’d gotten caught up leading a protest—complete with a megaphone, signs, and 50 other kids—over what they believed was the unfair ousting of assistant principal of organization Randi Damesek, as fallout from the cheating scandal. Jack forgot to hand in his locker paperwork. David got such a “terrible” locker assignment that he refused to pay the \$10-a-year fee to rent it.

Privilege and abuse of money and power come up a lot in conversation with the twins, who consider themselves decidedly middle class. Jack describes their father, Jerry, as a “serial entrepreneur; he’s basically come up with a new business idea every year since we were born, some more successful than others.” Jerry also runs two management consultancies and is an adjunct business professor at Baruch College. “He teaches two night classes and two day classes and works during the day. So you can see where we got it from,” says Jack. “Our dad is, like, our key inspiration.”



A poster for Jack Cahn’s Student Union presidential campaign; right, Jack with running mate Remi Moon, far right, in June.

(Photo: Geoffrey Decker (Jack); Bobby Doherty/New York Magazine (poster))

Their parents have been separated since the summer before the twins started sixth grade. So each week the kids switch between Dina’s apartment on the Upper East Side and Jerry’s in midtown east. “I guess that’s one of the reasons why David and I are close, because we’re sort of in this together,” says Jack.

Neither twin drinks, smokes, does drugs, or even touches coffee. “I work on natural highs. Plus iced tea. I love iced tea,” says David. The abstinence is philosophical, to give more weight to the causes they champion—stay “100 percent pure,” says Jack, and more people will believe what you say. There’s absolutely nothing on the walls of

the bunk-bed room they share with Daniel at their father's place that would indicate teenagers had ever stepped foot in there, and they say their room at their mom's is pretty much the same, just an abundance of trophies and books from their favorite authors, such as Ayn Rand. They don't watch TV; they don't have pop idols, nor do they seem to listen to music at all. (During a conference call with other JSA members, one kid suggested they do a debate about how Beyoncé's "Single Ladies" video was the best video of all time, and Jack's response was "I have no idea what that is.")

Around the time their parents moved to separate apartments, the twins ran for and won the seventh-grade class co-presidency at Ramaz and quit going to Jewish day camp to get their first jobs (working at Jewish day camp). They took the test for Stuyvesant when their father suggested "they were outstripping where they were in eighth grade in terms of the way the school was dealing with the world," Jerry says; the twins wanted to study Chinese, which Ramaz does not offer.

Their mother had hoped to keep them in yeshiva, where they were comfortable and had friends. "There was drama around that topic," she says. But Dina works with children with special needs, and she's developed a philosophy, she says, of "accept the child you have ... I just want them to be mensches."

Without telling me explicitly so, the twins seem to have divided up the tasks associated with handling me. Jack, the politician, becomes my main point person, the smiling face greeting me outside Stuyvesant at 3:30 p.m. after school every day. He has an air of attentiveness, walking out of his way to make sure I get to the subway safely, fretting over directions when he sends me uptown to the maze of construction surrounding Columbia University Medical Center to meet David at a research lab one night.

David is in charge of keeping me abreast of their mutating, ballooning schedule and gets me into the student-run journalism class he teaches with his *Spectator* co-editor-in-chief, Edric Huang, as a "visiting professional." He's loud and boisterous about his opinions, but more disciplined and anxious than Jack about time management; more than a few times, I look up from a conversation with Jack to discover David has disappeared somewhere to do his homework.

The first day I enter Stuy is the Monday afternoon before the early deadlines for a chunk of the eleven colleges they're applying to. They want to go to the same school (they won't say which for fear of offending the others), and their mind meld is such that they wrote out their lists independently and still wound up writing down the same schools, including their first choice.

The week's ambitious lineup includes stuffing envelopes for the *Spectator* survey (David); getting tutored in Mandarin (both); tutoring other kids in computer science (David); doing college interviews (Jack); answering questions from kids who stop them in the hall about boycotting a new citywide essay test used to evaluate teachers that they think is ineffective (both); writing an editorial about boycotting the essay

test (both); studying for various tests (both); going up to Columbia to finish twenty-page papers for the Intel Science Talent Search competition (David); mastering the tango in ballroom-dancing phys-ed (Jack); producing an issue of the *Spectator* (David); and judging a local debate tournament (both).

On top of all this, every time they have a free moment, it seems another one of their friends is asking them to edit his college essays. "It's really uncomfortable," says Jack. "Every kid whose essay I've read is applying to the same college as I am."

"Some of the essays are so *bad*," says David. "I mean, if I was smart, I would start a business editing college essays and charge \$20." He mulls over the business model out loud, and a lightbulb goes off, and he turns to me. "You should do it! We can only charge twenty bucks because we're kids. You could charge 100 bucks! Five hundred bucks! Do you know how much money you could make?!"

By midweek, cracks are starting to show. With the college-application deadline looming, Jack has been running around town, trying to fetch and send out supplemental recommendations. We head to Entrepreneur Growth Capital, a commercial finance company where he had one of his two summer jobs (the other was at the Columbia neurology department) to meet his boss, Todd Sherer, who asks if I'm exhausted yet. (I am; the one day off I get from them, I sleep till 3 p.m.)

For the next 30 minutes, Jack hovers while Sherer prints the recommendations. "I'm so sorry, Todd," he says, taking deep breaths. "Don't worry," says Sherer. "One day we're going to be working for you. Better be nice to you now." Envelopes in hand, Jack leaves the building in one direction, then realizes he's gone the wrong way. "What do I want to do, what do I want to do, what do I want to do?" he says, to no one in particular.

We head to his dad's house, where Jack asks a family friend to write out the college addresses in neat handwriting, then asks her to rewrite some because they're not neat enough, then feels bad about saying they're not neat enough.

When the last envelope is addressed, he curls up on the floor and eats spaghetti.

Minutes later he's out the door; he has a test to study for and a date with FedEx. The family friend comes running after him with his MacBook power cord. "Oh my God, thank you!" he says. "You literally saved my life."

The twins are staying late one day so their speech-and-debate team can get filmed for an episode of *Take Me to Your Mother*, a "docu-comedy" show for NickMom in which star Andrea Rosen tries to garner advice on how to raise her 2-year-old son as a decent human being. The takeaway of the episode will be that Rosen learns to value critical thinking through getting creamed in debate by high schoolers, and the Cahns have been chosen to be her first and most intimidating opponents.

The way they tell it, their “debate careers” almost weren’t. Most debate tournaments happen on Friday nights or Saturday during the day, conflicting directly with the Sabbath. Since they can’t use any transport other than walking, if those tournaments are out of the city, they often have to travel ahead of the team and find a local parent or rabbi who’s willing to put them up overnight; with their father’s encouragement, they’ve been making those arrangements themselves since they were 15½. They also can’t “flow,” in debate parlance—take notes on their opponents’ case to refute it point by point—and had to spend a year and a half losing many debates they entered before learning how to do so in their heads.

Their very first debate tournament, when they were sophomores, was at Bronx Science on a Saturday. They walked there, ten miles from their father’s apartment. “Not fun,” says Jack.

“His feet were bleeding when we got there,” says David. “It was bad.”

Nearly an hour after they’d asked the kids to show up, the NickMom producers corral the team into the classroom to get miked up. “David?” a producer asks.

“Jack,” says Jack.

“When are we doing this?” asks David, seeming bemused and frustrated with the lack of time management on display. “We have a physics test tomorrow.”

The producers pull Jack and David aside. Jack was planning on reading a dense four-minute case on China’s economy they’d argued last year at a tournament at Harvard, but there’s no time. “Don’t you think it’s funny if he’s reading this crazy dense thing?” Rosen asks.

“If you want me to do it, I can do it for dramatic effect. I can read it quickly,” says Jack. “I’m a very intense case reader.”

Nearby, their teammates are gossiping about teachers, discussing necktie fashions, and playing something that looks like patty-cake on speed.

The producers usher the kids into the hallway, then film their dramatic entry, and the debate is on. Jack begins by citing a stat that links a decrease in the likelihood of war to increased U.S.-China economic interdependence. David jumps in: “We’ll also make the point that on net the United States benefited by gaining 1 million jobs and that for every job brought to China, the United States has gained 2.2 jobs, according to a study by Dartmouth.” Rosen’s jaw drops in exaggerated awe as the Cahns take turns citing statistics from Emory and *The Economist*.

The debate eventually moves to a “thought talk” on stress and whether there’s too much of it at Stuy, a topic the Cahns feel very strongly about. Jack even wrote an editorial called “Don’t Take My Stress Away,” railing against what he characterizes as the administration’s proposal to limit students to nine periods a day. “The problem is that a lot of students, like us, come here because we *want* to be stressed,”

says David. "We want to be pushed to that academic limit to succeed, and policies that promote de-stressing, policies that aim at making us all happier, in the end reduce our opportunities."

"If the school had its way, I would not be taking Chinese, because they proposed a policy that students shouldn't take two languages," says Jack. Then he and David both start speaking Chinese, then Spanish. "Each person has a different limit," says Jack. "Don't put a ceiling on my growth."

Rosen interjects. "Let me ask you this: When's the last time you guys just, like, blew off all your work, ordered a pizza, and watched, like, five hours of TV and then ate some ice cream, went for a walk, made a phone call to a girl?"

"You're creating this dichotomy," says Jack. "You're saying you're only really social if you have a girlfriend or pizza or ice cream. I hang out with friends, I eat pizza."

"But when's the last time you blew off a day and just chilled out for a whole day?" asks Rosen.

"We're Sabbath observers, so every Saturday we take 24 hours off," says David.

"Every seven days, we have that 24 hours off. Maybe we don't have any pizza, but you get that point."

As the twins speak, the show's executive producer keeps turning to me and whispering things like "Oh my God!" and "They may be the future co-presidents."

I convey her thoughts to the Cahns later. "Well, one of us would have to live in New Jersey," says David. "The president and vice-president can't be residents of the same state."

"We know," says Jack, "because our history teacher told us."