

Sderot youth find relief at Shaloh summer camp

Community fundraising effort provides escape for kids from embattled region

By Rachel L. Axelbank

Amid the happy pandemonium that prevails during pickup time at Summer Camp Gan Israel, it is easy to miss the 10 quiet youngsters who are, ultimately, the most fortunate to be there.

The camp, run by Shaloh House in Brighton, represents one half of the success of a recent communal effort to provide 20 school-age Sderot residents with a respite from the practically unremitting rocket attacks on their hometown.

While 10 beneficiaries of the fundraising project are spending their visit in New Hampshire at Camp Sunapee – the summertime affiliate of the Russian School of Mathematics in Newton – 10 others are finding relief at Gan Israel. Combined Jewish Philanthropies contributed \$5,000 to the effort and has allocated an additional \$260,000 from its Israel in Crisis Fund to relief efforts in Sderot and other embattled communities around Gaza.

“Here, I don’t hear the ‘Seva Adom,’” German Usupof, 14, told the *Advocate* through a translator, invoking the term

– Hebrew for “color red” – that in Sderot warns of the urgent need to take cover. He and his brother, Nadav, 11, both made the trip to Boston, for which German is glad. “It’s good to be together,” he added.

Accommodating the visitors called for a temporary transformation of Gan Israel into an overnight camp. Rabbi Dan Rodkin of Shaloh House accomplished this by renting a small house in Brighton and importing two Israeli Yeshiva students to serve as experienced counselors.

“At first, I was planning to have a psychologist as well – I was worried that the kids would be depressed or angry,” said Rodkin. “But they’re just happy, regular kids. I am amazed at how strong they are. They were basically living out of shelters in Sderot, but they have the personalities to get them through it.”

Instead of spending time in counseling, the kids have been engaged in a variety of standard summer camp activities, among them canoeing, swimming and playing soccer and tennis.

“I want to learn all of the American games,” Savi Izilov,



PHOTO BY RACHEL L. AXELBANK

Young Sderot residents at their summer quarters in Brighton.

13, said through a translator.

Still, the memory of terror-stricken Sderot is never far.

“This city is different from Sderot because here, you see people,” Chanan Yacobov, 12, said through a translator. Chanan, whose father was killed recently in a missile attack, had wanted to participate in the camp program with his 13-year-old brother. However, it was decided that his brother would stay with their mother. “She said, ‘This is all I have left,’” he added. But despite the tragedy that befell his

family, Chanan said he will not move away from Sderot when he is older. “If we leave Sderot, the next city will come under attack,” he said. “And if we continue to move, there will be no more Israel.”

Counselor Yisroel Kiel, 21, an Afula native who is currently studying at the Chabad Yeshiva in Brooklyn, called the camp program “very, very important.”

“I want to send these kids back to Israel happier and stronger,” he said. “I want to teach them what they need to know.”

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