



Escape From Grief Hartford Courant August 13, 2007



Photo by ROSS TAYLOR, August 3, 2007

DOLEY PALUMBO, left, and Adi Hegey, whose fathers died while serving in the Israeli Defense Forces, traveled from Israel with more than 40 other children to Camp Laurelwood in Madison for a free three-week stay this summer. Doley, 12, is from Beer Sheva, Israel, and Adi, also 12, is from Kiryat Gat, Israel.

By THOMAS KAPLAN | Courant Staff Writer
August 13, 2007

Yaniv Aharonov hears the knock on his family's front door on a sweltering August day. He sees three shadows outside. They are soldiers - and he knows what they are going to tell him.

His father is dead, a casualty of a Hezbollah rocket. Yaniv is 11, going on 12, and, now, fatherless. His mother won't stop crying. A soldier pulls the boy aside.

"You have to be the strongest in your family," he tells him. "You have to."

It's a scene that has played out hundreds of times across Israel for decades, as violence claims the lives of soldiers with tragic regularity. Yaniv is one of hundreds of children in Israel left fatherless, or orphaned entirely. Today, it's been a year since that knock. Yaniv recounts the day, slowly, until he is stopped by tears. But then he remembers, as he does so often, what that soldier told him.

Yaniv tells his story sitting in the shade outside the mess hall at Camp Laurelwood, a Jewish sleep-away camp in Madison. For his bar mitzvah gift, he is enjoying an all-expenses-paid, three-week visit to America, along with more than 40 other 12- and 13-year-olds, their fathers also casualties of war in Israel.

To the children, the trip to Camp Laurelwood is an escape from the stress and sadness of living in a country continually at war. It's also a chance to see America: New York City, Niagara Falls, Washington, D.C., and more. This is the fourth year that Camp Laurelwood has hosted the Israeli campers. Every child in Israel who has lost a parent in the course of their military service is invited to come at the time of their bar or bat mitzvah, with the trip funded by Laurelwood and the Israel Defense Forces' widows and children organization.



Dealing With Death

Yaniv is pained as he recalls last summer before the news of his father's death: hanging out and playing sports with his friends at home in Or Akiva, a town about 30 miles north of Tel Aviv. Yaniv trains for triathlons and wants to be an Olympian someday, wants to win the Tour de France. The 34 days of fighting last summer between Hezbollah and Israel killed hundreds and displaced hundreds of thousands of Lebanese and Israeli citizens.

A week before the eventual cease-fire, a rocket hit a camp of Israeli army reservists at Kfar Giladi, along the Lebanese border, in the worst single attack of the war. The rocket killed 12, Yaniv's father among them. So was the father of Lihi Karakash, 12, who joined Yaniv at Camp Laurelwood.

Lihi, too, had the soldiers knock at her door in Afula, just a few miles north of the West Bank. She was spending her summer instant messaging friends on the computer at home or going horseback riding.

Then, the war broke out, and rockets began to land in the outskirts of her city. She went to visit her father at his army post just a few days before the attack on Kfar Giladi. She caught him with cigarettes - a big no-no at home, she says - and he paid her off with candy, buying her silence.

She kept the candy as a sort of keepsake, waiting to devour it until her father came home from the war. She still has it. It's all she has left of her father.

Yaniv and Lihi are all smiles as they play in the sun on a recent Friday at camp. The past few weeks, Lihi says, have been "amazing;" she only wishes her camp getaway didn't have to come at such a high cost. Yet it's good just to get away for a few weeks. After their fathers died last summer, they say they were marked everywhere they went - they were the ones who were suffering, who had so much ripped away from them. They were marked, marked by death.

"In Israel, everybody feels pity for us," says Lihi, matter-of-factly, through an interpreter. "Here, we're just normal kids. We just want to be normal."

Bringing Smiles

They don't have summer camps in Israel, the kids say, at least not sleep-away camp. Most of the Israeli campers here have never been out of the country, and fewer have had an American friend before. They have exchanged gifts with their American friends - of whom there are about 150 at camp this week. They have visited the White House and the Capitol in Washington, taken in Niagara Falls and toured the Museum of Natural History, Central Park and the Toys "R" Us flagship in New York. And, they add, they got to sit in a real, live American traffic jam, too.

There are other nuances of American life that the kids enjoy. They giggle at the squirrels that scurry around the camp's 140 acres. They don't have those back in Israel. A squirrel pokes its head around the side of the mess hall; the kids laugh.

That's the whole idea of the trip, says Ruth Perechodnik, 35, who coordinates the program from Israel and then chaperones the group, along with several Israeli counselors in their twenties.

"We want to bring a smile [to their faces]," Perechodnik says. "All the year, they deal with death."



Not so at camp. "They want to play baseball the whole time," she says, laughing. Yaniv agrees. He speaks most comfortably in Hebrew, though when it comes to talking about his newfound love for baseball, the English just comes pouring out. Yaniv and Avner Sandaka, 13, of Upper Nazareth, would see baseball games on television at home, but neither knew how to play. But the Americans at camp quickly taught them.

"I love baseball," Yaniv says, repeating it several times for emphasis. That's not all he loves, either. There's soccer, football, arts and crafts, fishing and swimming, too. "It's a lot of fun," he says, before heading off to the pool.

That's the idea at Camp Laurelwood, which is marking its 70th anniversary this summer.

The children come to the camp at no cost to them, with the Israel Defense Forces raising about \$100,000 every year through private donations to fund the trip. Laurelwood subsidizes the majority of the costs of housing the campers, said Ruth Ann Ornstein, the camp's director.

"With the Jewish New Year a few weeks away, this is a mitzvah, a good deed," Ornstein said.

Back To Reality

On Thursday, the Israeli youths and their counselors boarded a 12-hour flight to Israel and the routine uncertainty of the region. They are tanned, adept at a few new sports and, perhaps, in slightly better spirits than they were when they got here.

But they return to a life of fear. Away from the violence, it's easy to get used to feeling safe every time you go outside, said Nitzan Moalem, 13, of Jerusalem, where suicide bombings have been a regularity over the last decade. Nitzan lost her father, a senior IDF commander, when his helicopter collided with another as they flew toward Lebanon in 1997. In all, 73 soldiers died, making it the worst air disaster in the IDF's history.

Nitzan was three. She says she isn't afraid of the violence. "We've already paid the price for it," she says.

She's just waiting to grow older so she can join the IDF. She wants to follow in her father's footsteps and be a top officer in a fighting unit, on the front lines.

Lihi, too, wants to be a military general, though after her father died, that would have been the last thing on her mind, she says. "It takes time to get to the realization that I lost my father," she says. But now, she says, she wants to serve her country.



The youths' counselors - themselves just out of the IDF - marvel at their strength. That's what got Yaniv here; otherwise, how could he leave his family on the one-year anniversary of his father's death? "I was confused," he says. "But I believe my father would have wanted me to go." It's hard enough being 12; it's unimaginably hard doing it while grieving, says his counselor, Lior Frig, 23, himself not six months out of the army.

"I'm very careful with this guy," he says. "It's still fresh."

But Yaniv says his wounds are scarring over. He's glad he came to America, but he's just as glad he's going home, he says. He will move forward; he won't let himself be pitied. "The soldiers told me to be strong for my family," he says. "Now I am the strongest."

And then he heads off to grab his bathing suit, to join his friends, his fellow soldiers, in the blue-green depths of the swimming pool.

