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News

Children's center director in Israel asks for help

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WESTPORT-"In a most Israeli way, I decided to come at the last minute," joked Shlomo Kessel to the 30 people gathered at Temple Israel last week.

Kessel is the executive director of the Emunah-Sarah Herzog Children's Center in Afula, northern Israel. He was in the U.S. to report on his 170 children, and how they had fared during the war.

The Emunah-Sarah Herzog Children's Center is a residential and after-school shelter for children who have suffered abuse and neglect. Kessel, a social worker and South African native, has run the facility since 2003, when he moved to the campus with his wife and four children.

"When this war broke out, we had no idea it would spread as far as Afula," Kessel began. But as Hezbollah missiles reached the city of 42,000, residents descended into bomb shelters or moved into temporary housing further south. The children at the center couldn't return to abusive homes.

"Our kids didn't have anywhere else to be," Kessel said, so staff cleared out two on-site bomb shelters and filled them with supplies for the long haul -- mattresses, water, games, and a TV.

Less than one week into the war, just before midnight, the "unmistakable" sound of air-raid sirens sent Kessel's wife and children running to the bomb shelter. When he joined them, he found 50 teenage residents on mattresses and chairs, sitting in silence in front of the television. "We didn't turn it off for three-and-a-half weeks," Kessel said.

The children started asking questions, survivors of trauma enduring yet another traumatic situation.

"One 13-year-old boy, a tough boy, asked a staff member. 'Is it okay to be scared?'" Kessel said, and when reassured, replied, "I'm glad, because I'm scared."

Sarah Herzog staff and children spent the war in and out of the shelters.

"Every time a siren went off, we told ourselves nothing would happen," Kessel said, "but there's nothing you can do but be scared and run for cover."

For the first two weeks of the war, staff took the children on field trips further south. But eventually, the kids asked to return to the center "to hang out and do 'normal' summer activities," Kessel said. So it was back to the TV, to the nightly reports of casualties. Rumors would spread - who had been killed, where they were from. "Eventually, it was someone you or your family knew," Kessel said. "The children were exposed to an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear, of people dying, of a constant state of mourning. It left its mark of deep depression on all of us."

Now, as the ceasefire holds, Kessel and his staff at Sarah Herzog work to return their children to a routine, and to meet the special needs created by the war.

"Through all this, the beautiful sight of 'Am Yisrael Echad,' 'All Israel is one people,' is evident," Kessel said. He told of an anonymous man who went around to the mini-marts of northern Israeli towns to pay off the bills of those who had been stuck in bomb shelters, or to set up credit for when they resumed their lives.

"I felt the need to tell our story, to ask for help for the children we serve," Kessel said. Many of the center's children will now require psychological evaluations to determine their emotional state, Kessel said, and one-on-one therapy. Before he left Israel, Kessel booked a group of 80 trauma experts to work with the children.

The war brought other unanticipated needs: air conditioning in the bomb shelters, additional overnight staff, and extra fulltime staff for the increased refugee population of children relocating from the north and



From left, Rabbi Robert Orkand of Temple Israel, Shlomo Kessel of the Emunah-Sarah Herzog Children's Center in Israel, and Steve Friedlander, executive director of UJA/Federation WJWN. Photo by Cindy Mindell



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temporarily housed at the center.

Funded partly by Israeli social-service agencies, Sarah Herzog relies primarily on private donations to run programs and provide therapy and basic material needs. Emunah, a worldwide Jewish women's organization, is a major donor.

Two Fairfield County UJA/Federations -- Westport Weston Wilton Norwalk, and Greenwich - have developed close relationships with the center over the last several years, and have designated it a beneficiary organization. In March, WWWN's Royal Purim Celebration raised \$23,000 for the center, in addition to an initial allocation last autumn.

"It's our hope and intent to again make the center the focal point of our 2007 Purim event," says executive director Steve Friedlander. In July, the WWWN board approved additional funding to help meet wartime needs.

Through the Federation, individuals in the WWWN community can "adopt" Sarah Herzog children, Friedlander says, to offer needed friendship as pen pals.

Before Kessel headed back to Afula, he met with potential donors at UJA/Federation of Greenwich.

"Shlomo talked with us about the center's need for backpacks for kids whose parents can't afford school supplies this year due to their being out of work during the war," said executive director Pam Ehrenkranz. An anonymous donor stepped forward to offer a matching gift for "operation backpack" for the center. It costs about \$100 to buy a new backpack, supplies and books for the year for each child.

"So far, we have donations totaling \$1,300, plus a matching amount of \$1,300," Ehrenkranz says. "That will give 26 kids what they need this year. Our goal is 75."

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