

Israeli 'Kids of Courage' go to camp with Beit Halochem

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SPECIAL TO THE CJN

Thirty-eight bar and bat mitzvah-age children of severely disabled Israeli war veterans are winding up a three-week stay at four Ontario summer camps – New Moon, Shalom, Wahanowin and Walden – as part of a new program of Beit Halochem Canada, Aid to Disabled Veterans of Israel.

The project, called Kids of Courage, is new to Beit Halochem, but not to three of the camps. Shalom came on board this year, but the others have been hosting Israeli children for years as part of a program started by Israeli Victims of War (IVOW), a Montreal-based, independent charitable organization founded in 1984 to support Israeli children whose families have been affected by war or terrorism.

Richard Dermer, co-president of IVOW, said changes were made this year “on a friendly basis” after Beit Halochem representatives in Israel did outreach last year for the organization. Now, Beit Halochem kids participate in the program at Ontario camps under the Beit Halochem umbrella, while IVOW continues to bring children to Camp B’nai Brith and the Y Country Camp in Quebec.

The programs run concurrently, and

both have Israeli chaperones who travel with the children. As well, the host organizations extend the trip by taking Israeli visitors to attractions in the GTA for the Beit Halochem program, and in Montreal, Toronto and Ottawa for the IVOW program.

Lisa Levy, Beit Halochem Canada’s executive director, named the Beit Halochem program Kids of Courage, because participants’ parents “suddenly came home in a wheelchair, or blinded. It’s a change in lifestyle, and it takes a lot of strength.” Beit Halochem provides rehabilitation services to 51,000 disabled veterans and victims of terror through its centres in Israel.

A camp stay in Canada provides relief to parents, and is “an amazing experience” for the children, all of whom speak English, Levy said. “They mingle with the [Canadian] kids... They are good ambassadors of Israel and of Beit Halochem.”

Dana Pinhasov – the volunteer Israeli co-ordinator of the Beit Halochem program, a mother of four and a war veteran who herself suffered extensive burns in a bus bombing – told *The CJN* she hoped participants would experience “a different point of view of the world. If they have a disabled parent at home with PTSD or other injuries, they live with a lot of stress, and [here] they get to breathe a little



Israeli and Canadian campers enjoy water activities at Camp Walden as part of the Kids of Courage program.

more.” She added that she wants the Canadian campers to understand what their Israeli counterparts are going through. Her own children took part in the program in previous years, and are still in touch with their Canadian friends.

Most of the Israeli children haven’t been overseas, “and definitely not to Canada,” Pinhasov said. “You have to grow from everything that happens to you.”

Sol Birenbaum, a co-owner of Camp Walden, said the Israelis who come to his camp “are like every other kid here. They experience the activities, and they have fun... We just have them seamlessly integrated into Walden life.”

Relationships between Israeli and Can-

adian campers have been long-lasting, he noted, citing visits to past Israeli campers by some of their Canadian counterparts when they were in Israel as part of the March of the Living.

For Birenbaum, hosting Israeli kids is a “very direct” way of giving. “The kids tell me every day how much fun they’re having.”

In a phone interview from Montreal, Dermer expressed pleasure over the increase in the number of children this year. In addition to Beit Halochem’s 38 participants, IVOW brought 43 kids to its two affiliated camps. “There’s more kids, so that’s fantastic... We really try and make it as valuable and as fun an experience for these kids as possible.” ■