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It takes a village...

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J'lem Hills may seem innocent from the outside, but for the children who live within its walls, heartbreaking tales of broken families, abuse and abandonment are more the norm.



Photo by: Courtesy of Leonid Berlin

Geographically they are only a few kilometers apart, yet Moshav Neveh Ilan and the nearby Jerusalem Hills Therapeutic Center, a village for children at risk, might as well be located on different planets.

Nestled along the Jerusalem corridor, Neveh Ilan not only boasts the idyllic rural charm of a modern-day agricultural settlement, but since selling off its lands, the moshav has also become a desirable location for young, affluent families.

Jerusalem Hills might share the same inspiring scenery, but for the children who live within its walls, heartbreaking tales of broken families, abuse and abandonment are more the norm.

Opened in 2009, the spacious youth village, which was founded by Bnai B'rith Women in 1943 and moved to its present location from Jerusalem three years ago, houses roughly 100 children aged seven through 18. All those living there are considered at risk, and most have been victims of emotional, physical or sexual abuse by their parents. For many of the children, Jerusalem Hills is the last stop after a long line of unsuccessful foster families and other types of group homes.

While the staff at the facility strives to provide a well-cared-for and safe environment for all the children whom social welfare services have placed here, they are well aware that an institution can never replicate the warmth and love of a nuclear family.

BUT OVER the past year, a pioneering group of individuals from both Jerusalem Hills and Neveh Ilan has brought the two "villages" together, seeing the unlikely interaction as mutually beneficial.

“Jerusalem Hills opened on this site three years ago, and the connection with Neveh Ilan happened just over a year ago, when some people from the moshav were driving past and wanted to know more about what we do here,” explains Shira Skolnick, the children’s home spokeswoman.

After that initial introduction, she says, some Neveh Ilan residents wanted to find a way to help the children. Jerusalem Hills staff told them about the plight of a small group of children who almost never get to leave the facility. While the majority do return home to their families during Jewish holidays and at other times during the year, some have either no family to go to, or a family structure that is so fragmented they can never return home.

“There are about 20 children who stay with us 365 days a year. They have no homes to go to and no families to come and visit them,” says Skolnick. “It is these children whom Neveh Ilan has adopted.”

Although the children, for legal and emotional reasons, cannot be directly adopted or even have one-on-one interactions with Neveh Ilan residents, the moshav has collectively undertaken to adopt them.

Over the past year, since the relationship between the two villages started, moshav members have held several events aimed at bringing a small amount of happiness into these deprived children’s lives.

“We have the power to make [a] change,” says Armin Grunewald, manager of the Neve Ilan Hotel, which is part of the CHotels chain. “These children have no chance in life, but we can do what we can to make their lives sweet.”

Grunewald, who was drawn into helping the children after the initial group of Neveh Ilan residents held an informational evening last year, says that corporate social responsibility or volunteering in the community is an integral part of the C-Hotels philosophy.

“I was looking for a way to get involved in the wider community, either donating food to a soup kitchen like many other hotels do, or something else,” recalls the hotel manager, who previously ran a hotel in Eilat. “At first I was skeptical that we could actually work with the children’s village, but suddenly everything came together.

“I know that we can’t fix their entire world, but we can do what we can to help make their lives a little bit better,” he adds.

Initially the hotel helped out over Passover by providing kosher meals to the children forced to stay behind, but after a while, the help extended beyond the basic baskets of food.

“I told the chef to add in a surprise each day – you know, a chocolate bar or an ice cream, so that the children could really feel they were getting a treat,” says Grunewald, who continued his help throughout the summer, including inviting the children for a movie night and a day of fun that included use of the adjacent swimming pool.

“We are trying to find even more ways to help them,” continues Grunewald, describing how the hotel is now providing work experience to one of the older boys, who expressed an interest in cooking.

“He comes on a regular basis to volunteer in our kitchen,” he says. “It is fun for him, and he gets to learn skills that might be useful in the future. When he comes to us... it gives him a framework outside of the children’s village.”

The hotel manager says he is now looking for other ways to help, including tapping into the goodwill of hotel guests to raise funds for Jerusalem Hills.

“I hope to set up a system sometime this year where every hotel guest donates just a small amount of money – not too much for them, but it will really go a long way to helping out the kids in the village,” he says.

“WE NEED all the help we can get, from anywhere, and we really want the children to have a connection with the community around them,” points out Gerard Pulver, Jerusalem Hills executive director and a trained clinical psychologist.

He has been working at the children’s village for more than 33 years and says that outside volunteers such as Neveh Ilan provide an important source of normalcy for the children and show them that there are people outside their immediate world who do care about them.

“The children here are somewhat cocooned inside. We provide them with all the services and treatments they need, so it is really like an incubator, but little by little we do try to encourage them to reach the outside world and interact,” he says, adding that when the facility was located in Jerusalem, interaction with those outside was much easier.

Pulver says that other neighboring communities help out, too. Just down the road, the ultra-Orthodox community of Telz Stone provides bar mitzva training to the boys, and next door, the Arab village of Abu Ghosh is a source of fresh fruits, vegetables and other food.

While communication with these communities is encouraged, the executive director cautions that it can’t happen on an individual basis because the children are too vulnerable.

“They have very high expectations, and sometimes matching them up with individuals or families does not work out. That can be very damaging,” he says, adding that “it is every child’s dream to either go home or find a new home.”

IN ADDITION to benefiting the Jerusalem Hills children, the interaction with Neveh Ilan is a feel-good moral experience for those who are volunteering.

One Neveh Ilan resident, who prefers to remain anonymous, says she uses the volunteer work to teach her own children to appreciate the life they have.

“In Neveh Ilan, we live in a bubble where the residents are well supported by each other and have a very comfortable life, but right under our noses there is an institution of children who live in a completely different reality,” she observes. “What could be better than to help those people who are living so close to us?” As part of the outreach, she adds, moshav children have been encouraged to fundraise for their counterparts in Jerusalem Hills.

Inspired by the volunteering, the moshav resident says there are now plans to expand the initiative to everyone living in Neveh Ilan, encouraging them to help out either by directly volunteering or by using their contacts to provide something extra for the Jerusalem Hills children.

“Now we have found someone who is interested in arranging birthday parties for each child,” she says. “We hope to keep the momentum going and encourage other people to come forward and help out.”