

Learn About 'Children of Sderot' Project at the Meeting in Lynn

Yulia Zhorov
Jewish Journal Staff

On April 11, at 2 p.m., the entire community is invited to attend an informational meeting about The Children of Sderot Project at Congregation Ahabat Sholom in Lynn.

Representatives from the Russian Jewish Community Foundation (RJCF) will speak about fundraising efforts and why it is still important to continue to help the Sderot community to rebuild their lives. There will be a slide-show presentation about its people and the children who, thanks to donations and the help of volunteers, were given another chance at a relatively normal childhood. College students from Boston and the North Shore who were volunteer counselors at the summer camps in Israel or who will go there this year will speak about their life-altering experiences working with those children. Rabbi Avraham Kelman will speak about why it is necessary for the American Jewish community to get involved with the project.

Three years ago, after the Russian Community learned about the continual bombardment of Kassam rockets onto the city of Sderot, which borders Gaza, many things were accomplished. In just two months the community raised \$36,000 — enough to bring 20 children to American summer camps.

"After that summer, we all



Courtesy of RJCF

Volunteer counselor Eugene Wolfson is shown teaching Sderot campers math at last year's summer camp in Israel.

forged such a connection with these kids, that we realized we couldn't just abandon them. So we decided to start an after-school program within Sderot to teach math and English, and to establish a summer camp within Israel, but outside of Sderot," said Masha Rifkin, a Cornell graduate whose initial letter in February of 2007 from Sderot sparked the beginning of the project.

Three years later, these kids have a safe place to learn; the after-school program, funded by the RJCF is run in a completely remodeled building. The after-school now boasts many different programs, including math, English, arts, crafts, ceramics, music, cooking and leadership programs.

The RJCF partnered with The Jewish National Fund/Green Horizons to open one winter and two summer camps in Israel,

each hosting 50 children for two weeks, and is completely run by volunteer counselors.

"So far, the current situation in Sderot is calm and life has seemingly returned to normal," said Rifkin. "But still, everyone senses that the Kassams will start dropping again. We are dealing with an entire generation of children that doesn't remember a time without Kassams, which means they're mentally and physically affected and their education is delayed."

This year once again, 70 children from Sderot will go to camp for hiking, swimming and socializing. As always, counselors from Boston and the North Shore will travel to Israel to work with the children in a mutually beneficial arrangement.

Mikhail Wolfson of Swampscott, a junior at UMass in Amherst who worked with

children from Sderot at the first camp in New Hampshire, then traveled twice to Israel to volunteer his time, as a counselor, remembers, "We were in the unique position to actually go forth and on a personal level change the lives of these children and their families for the better. It was a demanding experience. However I am incredibly glad to have had an opportunity to meet and befriend these wonderful children, and hope that as a community, we can continue to work with them to improve their everyday lives."

Mikhail's brother, Eugene Wolfson, a senior at Brandeis University, went to Israel along with his brother and mother, local mural artist Tamara Wolfson.

"I can't say enough how glad I am to have devoted a small part of a summer to being with these kids. Every time I think about it, I am so impressed by how resilient these children are. The vast majority of their lives had been spent in a place where people who indiscriminately hate them, attempt to kill them many times a day; but instead of letting these circumstances control them, they continue to enjoy their childhood. My experience is humbling and rewarding. Day to day it was exhausting work, but each one of them made it worth it," Wolfson said.

Anna Kamenetsky of Newton, who was a camp director last summer, was fascinated with

how much the children have changed in three years:

"When I met them three years ago, they were little brats! They couldn't understand, and didn't think that anyone cared about Sderot — so they took us for granted because they didn't trust us. But now they're maturing; they're older and teaching the younger kids about respect and about leadership. They have more pride than I've ever seen in them."

Mariya Gofshteyn of Marblehead, who is spearheading the local fundraising efforts, said she believes the project has a greater effect on "our own America-raised children. It teaches them responsibility. At this meeting you will meet the new generation of young leaders who, instead of vacations or internships, will go to Israel" to counsel these children during a peaceful, adventure-filled summer.

At the meeting, Rimma Pivovarov of Marblehead, Anna Kamenetsky and Masha Rifkin, both of Newton, Mikhail Wolfson and Alina Sapozhnikov, both of Swampscott, will speak.

To learn more about the RJCF 'Children of Sderot Project,' or to donate, go to: www.rjcf.com, a nonprofit organization.

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