

Sderot Children Hope for Respite This Summer in the Jerusalem Mountains

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After successfully bringing 20 Israeli children out of the line of fire on the border with Gaza, where Kassam rockets fall daily, and into the safety of the Boston area last year, the Russian community here is about to do it again. But this time, it will be a little different.

Rather than fly the children out of Israel and into Boston, the Russian community of Greater Boston is raising money to send 50 children living in Sderot to summer camp in the Jerusalem mountains and to winter camp in the Negev over Chanukah.

“This year, we have decided to bring the children to another safe place, but inside Israel itself,” said Rimma Pivovarov, a Math/Biology major at Northeastern University from Marblehead. “The decision to stay inside Israel was prompted by the desire to instill national pride into this young generation of Israelis. It is also important to connect American youth, who will come to Israel as their counselors, with Israel.”

Pivovarov, who was a camp counselor for the Sderot children in New Hampshire last summer, will be a volunteer counselor again with five other university students from Boston and the North Shore.

“This program will let the six of us make a footprint in the land of Israel and with continued support each year, more and more students will spend their summers volunteering to make a safe camp in the hills of Jerusalem for the children of Sderot,” she said.

In March, members of the Russian Jewish Community Foundation of Brookline met with Israel Defense Forces Major General Uzi Dayan, Chairman of The Green Horizons, (an Israeli organization similar to the Boy Scouts of America, which provides group leadership and educational programs for kids in summer camps) and Colonel Sharon Davidovich, emissary of the Jewish National Fund in Boston, one of the biggest landowners in Israel that found locations for the camps, to launch the Sderot project’s second year.

Last year many people from Greater Boston became personally involved with the project. Some organized fundraisers among their friends and co-workers, not just collecting funds but developing awareness about the dire situation in the city of Sderot. What started as an effort to bring children to safety just for the summer grew into a great friendship between Sderot families and those from the Greater Boston Russian-Jewish commu-

nities.

Inna Rifkin, founder and director of the Russian School of Mathematics in Needham who initiated last summer’s unprecedented campaign, said, “After the children went back home to Sderot, we started thinking about how we could help [to keep them out of harm’s way]. We were thinking in terms of giving them a safe place to gather for after-school activities.”

With \$30,000 left over from last summer, the RJCF paid for the renovation of an abandoned bomb shelter.

“They need a safe place to gather. The bomb shelter, which is in the basement of a residence, can hold an event for 20 people. There are classes for children and adults as well as community celebrations that can be held there,” Rifkin said. She visited Sderot last winter and stayed there for five days. “With parents being away at work, after-school programs where children can get together are incredibly important. We can help by assisting the people of Sderot to have a life that is as close to normal as possible. When we visited Sderot last winter we were so happy to see our Sderot kids, still talking about their trip to Boston as the highlight of their life.”

Greg Margolin, a member of RJCF’s board of directors, visited Sderot in January 2008. “I really wanted to see the shelter that was built with hard-earned money by people of the Russian Jewish community of Boston, and I felt that I have to show the solidarity with people of the city,” Margolin said.

He remembers that coming to the city was like driving into a war movie – blocked roads, crowds, police cars, ambulances. “I drove to Sderot, leaving Jerusalem. I drove through a normal, developed country, with much better roads than in many places in the states. And then I made a turn to Sderot. There were fewer and fewer cars, and when I came to the city I felt that I drove in on a movie set where they were shooting a war movie. My GPS told me to make a left on a rotary, roundabout in local parlance, but I could not. The turn was blocked by a police car and fifty yards from the block I saw a scene familiar from the news — a crowd, an ambulance — a rocket just fell there. Despite protests from my GPS I made a circle and came back. The police car had already left and I was able to proceed to my destination. A few minutes later we were meeting with people from a local organization, Afikim Be Negev. They presented me with a “souvenir from Sderot”, a piece of Kassam, that was still hot. In other places people meet their



Courtesy photos

Sderot families (above) wish for peace in their city. Inna Rifkin sits in the middle. Below, the aftermath of a Kassam rocket fired into Sderot. This photo was taken five minutes after the rocket almost hit a Sderot house, barely missing children playing outside.



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Gary Pivovarov, Alina Sapozhnikova, Rimma Pivovarov, Irina Zhorov and Liz Tverskaya at the Israel@60 celebration raised awareness and money for the Children of Sderot Project with posters, flyers and a Power Point presentation.

guests with hot, freshly baked bread. In Sderot, it is Kassams. That day they dropped in excess of 55 Kassams on the city,” wrote Margolin in his blog.

“It is very important for the Sderot citizens to know that people in America care about them. It has also helped our Russian-Jewish American youth — who are helping to fundraise for the project — to gain a sense of Jewish identity and national pride,” Rifkin said. “After they got involved with the project, for most of them it became a personal thing, an experience they can relate to, a connection to the State of Israel and a sense that they are making differences in lives of real people.”

“My biggest wish is to see this project become a long-time commitment for the members

of our Russian-speaking Jewish community, a charity of their choice,” Rifkin said.

The Russian community needs to raise \$75,000 for the summer and winter camps. To date \$31,000 has been raised. There is an urgent need to raise another \$44,000. All donations are tax-deductible. Those interested in helping may send checks payable to the RJCF Children of Sderot Fund and mail it to Russian Jewish Community Foundation, 1674 Beacon Street, Brookline, MA 02455, or online at www.rjcf.com.

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