

In Sderot, a story of childhood restored

How Russian Jews in Boston helped transform Israeli lives

By Anna Kamenetsky
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It's less than a mile from the Gaza and, to many, the city is best known for being subjected to furious rocket attacks. Still, I can't seem to stay away from Sderot.

When I was accepted into the Birthright Program to Israel, I extended my trip to be able to visit the city, my third trip there in just one year. Friends ask, "What is so great that you keep going back?" My answer: "To see the kids, that's why."

It is incredible to see how much has been accomplished since the Russian Jewish Community Foundation (RJCF) launched its Children of Sderot project three years ago. The Boston group began with bringing 20 children to America for summer camp, after which it began raising money for bomb shelters and a camp in Israel. Now, we're moving on to what I think is the best project of all: creating an after-school program for the children, which they call Nash Kloob (Our Club).

Back before last winter's Gaza War, when kassams regularly rained on the city, all the children's programs were moved to safer regions. After school, Sderot's kids would go home and just wait — scared and alone — for their parents to return from work. Now, with RJCF's support, these children not only have a safe haven, but a place to learn English and math; take classes in arts and crafts; and so much more. They have been given another shot at the childhood that the bombing had nearly destroyed.

The kids themselves helped make this happen, helping to rebuild and remodel their kloob. Instead of hiring professionals to remove the shattered glass, plaster and garbage, the children insisted on doing it themselves. Right after returning home from camp this past summer, they transformed what amounted to a dump into a practical, fun and safe place for kids.

Before showing me their handiwork, Children of Sderot coordinator and founder Natasha Panaitov took me to a neighboring building that her group hopes soon to acquire. Panaitov wanted to give me an idea of what the club had looked like before the renovation. Shrapnel, dirt and broken furniture littered the floors. We had to watch our step to avoid stepping on glass



Above: Children sit in the arts and crafts room at Nash Kloob, their after-school club in Sderot. Before the kids renovated it, the room was a wreck and strewn with glass, like the inside of a neighboring building (left). Below: Anna Kamenetsky flanked by her "heroes" (from left): Valera, German, Slavik and Robert.



and other sharp objects.

When Natasha took me into the club, I was astonished — and filled with the uttermost joy. Having donated a lot of my own time and money into the Children of Sderot Project, I felt so gratified to see how

well it was turning out. Murals covered the walls and neatly arranged supplies filled the shelves. The kids hustled about, filling up the blackboards and whiteboards, creating paintings and ceramics and baking delicious "vareniki," a ravioli-like specialty that they made especially for my visit.

To hear the children's laughter, to see the hope sparkling in their eyes — this is what we have been working toward the last three years.

An adult may think three

years is nothing, but to a kid it's an eternity. I recall how I felt when I met the children of Sderot three years ago. I would never have imagined that they could change, mature and prosper to the extent that they have today. When I first met Slavik, he was half a foot shorter than I and exceptionally rowdy, selfish and aggressive. He certainly improved during the four weeks of camp that summer, but what a leap he has made in the three years since. Not only do I look up to Slavik because of his height — much taller than my 5-feet, 6-inches — but also because of the person he has become. I knew that the fire was in him somewhere, but now Slavik is a force to be reckoned with — the leader of the pack, the one all the children adore and admire.

He and my other heroes, like German, Robert and Valera, have grown up right in front of my eyes. By their example, they show the other kids how to behave and express their appreciation. They have instilled in them a sense of trust and, most important, pride.

To bear the children's laughter, to see the hope sparkling in their eyes — this is what we have been working toward the last three years.

I, too, have been transformed by the Children of Sderot program. I was always grateful for what I have in my life, but seeing what those children have gone through made me appreciate all the more that my family slipped through the Soviet Union's closing gates of immigration 19 years ago. Had we not, I might have ended up in Sderot, where the aliyah from the Soviet Union in the 1990s doubled the population. I would have had to live in constant fear of a missile strike and suffered the indelible psychological scars — right alongside Slavik, German, Robert, Valera and all the other children.

Spending my winter and summer breaks as a counselor in Sderot this past year, I saw the children enjoying their lives to the fullest. They now know that they are not alone, but have the Russian Jewish community of Boston behind them, supporting them every step of the way.

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