

Calgary helps Israel's blind

Jewish Free Press

December 17th 2005

By Richard Bronstein

Unlike the destruction in the southern U.S. this year, Hurricane Rena, which blew through Calgary last month, was a force for immense good.

The "hurricane" in question was Rena Cohen, a long-time Calgary resident and community activist who is now based in Israel. While visiting family and friends here, Rena Cohen took every opportunity to raise awareness for a special project she is involved with in Israel. It's called Beit Yael - The Center for the Advancement of the Blind, which is based in Safed.

The program was founded by Dr. Yael Ben-Dor in 1976 to offer visually impaired Israelis rehabilitation and retraining. Although there were similar programs in more populated parts of Israel, there was nothing in Safed, an area that has long suffered from lack of economic development.

A big breakthrough happened in 1987 when a large Calgary-based foundation came through with \$500,000 to build a special facility for the blind and visually impaired.

Since then, The Center for the Advancement of the Blind has expanded greatly.

The Safed facility is available to everyone regardless of age, ethnicity or ability to pay. "The goal of the center is that through our various programs, we empower the sight handicapped to function effectively, to reach their maximum potential, to achieve their ambitions," says Rena Cohen.

Among the activities at the center is a residential program of ten fully equipped double rooms which offers live-in programs. The Safed center hosts holiday recreation camps for young Israelis between the age of 6-18, as well as those age 19-40. Both programs have been enjoyed by over 1,700 participants. The facility is frequently used by vision impaired university students. Also offered are music and writing workshops, computer courses, Hebrew classes for newcomers, seminars for parents of blind children and for children of blind parents.

Unique in all of Israel is a one-month long residential and rehabilitation program for those over 40 who are newly blind or going blind.

"The philosophy of the staff is to teach people to be independent and pro-active," says Cohen. "If you get a chance to visit here, you quickly come to appreciate that there is nothing that the blind cannot do. All it takes is the right kind of training and assistance."

Of concern to the Safed organization is the erosion of government support for social services in Israel, which is the original reason that "Hurricane" Rena came to Calgary. She met with a number of individuals and institutions, such as House of Jacob and Chabad, to interest them in the issues of the blind in Israel.

She would also like to hook up with youth groups in the city to interest them in selling “Tsfat Candles” as a fund raising activity for the Center for the Advancement of the Blind.

“I hope I gave Calgarians a tremendous sense of what is being done for the blind by people from Calgary, and how much more needs to be done,” she says.

Information on The Center for the Advancement of the Blind can be located at <http://www.beityael.org/> or you can email info@beityael.org.

[photo captions]

Rena Cohen, director of development, The Center for the Advancement of the Blind.

Vision impaired youth enjoy the thrill of rafting on the Jordan River. Recreation programs not only provide joy, but instill self-confidence in further development.