

Chanukah feature

Welcome to Beit Yael, Center for the Advancement of the Blind, Safed, Israel

A former Calgarian writes about her work there

By **RENA DVORKIN COHEN**
 I had walked that way many times before unaware of the one story pink brick building nestled in the small garden. One day an email message read: "Can you help?" I replied, "yes," and soon I was entering that building. Inside, a world I didn't know existed ... yet one I was about to join. Now, the longer I am involved, the more interested I am, and the more involved I become trying to make certain that our programs and services continue.



A group outside Beit Yael: Israel has over 30,000 individuals who are vision impaired.

Dr. Yael Ben Dor z'l arrived in Israel from Germany shortly before the Second World War. Living in Safed, she became aware of many special needs. By the mid 1970s she had assessed that the local vision-impaired needed more help: services for them were dreadfully lacking. In 1987, a Calgary foundation heard of her work: their \$500,000 donation built a unique facility. The center could now provide a variety of short-term live-in programs for blind and/or vision impaired Israelis of all ages, from all over the country. Over the years, Beit Yael has grown both in importance and in the number of people it serves.

Fifteen years ago, I made aliyah directly to Safed. After beginning work at Beit Yael, six

Mile high

(Cont. from page B2.)

from Winnipeg, but I wouldn't dare add this to the discussion). If the \$22.00 sandwich and the \$12.95 sandwich look identical, except for the accessories, isn't this an honest mistake? (You can go to www.carnegiedeli.com for further information and to see the actual sandwich, which looks absolutely delicious). I leave this to you to try and decide whether this really constitutes a crime.

Way back in September, when I first heard this story, my father-in-law and I concluded that it was a heck of a schlep (never mind the expense) just for a corned beef sandwich, but it was worth every penny for the experience. Morris took a video of the events leading up to this day that will never be forgotten, and there is even a picture on Stans's cell phone of the actual sandwich. Honestly, I would have loved to be there, whatever the sandwich cost.

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years ago, I heard that the founding donation had come from a Calgary family. Although I had moved to Toronto seven years before making aliyah, Calgary was my hometown: I had known this family. We often say that before G-d creates the illness, He provides the cure. It seems that even before I came on aliyah, He had already prepared a job for me.

My mother was 92 at the end of November: she was the second Jewish girl born in Calgary. My father arrived as a young boy from Russia and both families were very large. Our family was involved with youth groups, mens' and womens' local and international organizations, schools and synagogues. My role models served me well as over the years I, too, became involved in the Jewish community. Once I had a business card that read "Rena Cohen, Professional Volunteer." Now, living in Israel, I find myself doing much the same: helping in whatever way possible.

People often ask how I could move so far away from my elderly parents and my four grown children. Others ask, "Why Safed?" Having been to Israel many times with family, on several UIA of Canada missions, and on Canadian Hadassah-WIZO'S only public affairs seminar in 1979, Safed always had a special attraction for me. Although I don't paint, one never knows. And when asked if I am an artist, I usually reply, "Only in the way I am creating my life."

Life, by nature, is a continually creative process, or at least it should be! As director of development for Beit Yael, I am constantly challenged. Our goal is to meet the needs demanded by our daily work with the vision-impaired.

During the summer months, young people (Cont. on page B4. See "Beit Yael".)



Jewish organizations on this page extend Chanukah greetings



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**Happy
Chanukah!**

*May Chanukah's spirit
of dedication and faith
embrace your family
at this time and reside
with you throughout
the coming year.*



Judy Wasylycia-Leis

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Authorized by Tarlochan Gill, official agent of Judy Wasylycia-Leis.

Chanukah feature

Beit Yael

(Cont. from page B3.)

from the ages of 9 – 18 come at different times according to their age groups, to spend five days participating in all kinds of recreational activities. If you saw them out and about, you would not know that they were vision impaired at all. They go horseback riding, canoeing on the Jordan River, hiking, swimming in the Kinneret, on boat rides, for jeep rides and doing everything we can think of to keep them busy and having fun. We even go berry picking on the Golan Heights when we can.

There are no other recreational summer camps in Israel for these children, and it is so rewarding to see them having a wonderful time. One mother had never let her 10-year-old son leave home before. We assured her that all would be well: he would eat, sleep, and enjoy. Daily she called to speak with him, but he was too busy with his friends and activities to speak with her.

Edna, a Tsfat senior, was housebound for 10 years. She became blind in her 40s, and had no one to train or teach her new skills to make her life more bearable. So, she just sat home and waited. When we heard about her, we offered to pick her up and bring her to our morning activity program for local seniors. Now she attends daily: she has learned to get around using her white cane and has become quite independent.

Israel has over 30,000 individuals who are certified as vision-impaired. An additional 2,000 are certified each year because of problems related to aging, accidents and terrorist attacks. This annual pattern of increase motivated us to be even more creative in our approach to serving the growing need. Beit Yael, The Israeli Government's Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare and Midgal Or (The Israeli Lighthouse)

began to co-sponsor a month-long residential rehabilitation program. The 12th one started the beginning of November.

Sixteen people from all over Israel have come to spend a month at Beit Yael. Here they start with the very basics: to cook, to use the white cane, graduating to more complicated skills, such as computers. With the help of our professional staff, we try to empower them to function effectively, to be independent. Business people who thought they would have to give up their companies have not only continued to work, but their companies have grown and flourished, while



Members of the seniors' program at Beit Yael.

others have learned new trades. Despite sight defects, they master new skills, use their abilities and live independently in a sighted world. With creative techniques and concepts, they compensate for their vision loss. In trying to help people cope with their new state of blindness, we want them to discover and define their individual strengths, and we work to reinforce their ability in these areas. We teach that life is about choosing – not about having self-pity, but to become proactive and to make the best of each situation.

We are currently planning two new seminars for next year specifically for mothers – one for sighted mothers who have blind and/or vision impaired children, the other for mothers who are blind and have either blind or sighted children. The challenges that face them are very great indeed: they need all the help and support that they can get. We are also planning a seminar for couples where one is going blind. Anyone who has had someone in the family go blind knows from first hand experience what a great strain this puts on the family and on relationships.

Beit Yael provides assistance to both children and adults. Every donation that we are given makes a difference in the life of someone who is blind and/or vision impaired. Annually there is less and less government money available for social services, including services to the blind. Welfare subsidies are also being routinely cut-back. We can't do our work alone. Families who want to send their children to our summer programs are often impacted by a lack of finances. The cost of sending a child to this program is \$400. Families are asked to pay \$60, and we raise the funds to cover the rest. However, for a family to pay even \$60 can be impossible today because of the many cutbacks in the Israeli economy due to a range of issues, including terror attacks and their impact on tourism.

Canadians in particular should know that because of one specific donation to Israel's blind and vision impaired by a Calgary foundation, we are able to provide unique programs that are not available nor duplicated anywhere else in the country. They should feel quite proud of our work.

We trust that as people hear more about our programs and unique role, they will wish to support Beit Yael's activities. They may even want to come to volunteer. Chanukah in Israel is recognized as the time to donate to the blind and vision impaired. We hope that you will help us to shed light in what could be a very dark and lonely corner of the world.

Information about all Beit Yael's programs and services is on our web site: www.beityael.org or contact us directly at: info@beityael.org

So, when are you coming to visit?