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Centre helps vision-impaired gain independence

By SHERI SHEFA

Staff Reporter

There are more than 20,000 blind and vision-impaired men, women and children in Israel, but not enough resources to help them, Rena Cohen says.

Cohen, the director of development for Beit Yael, the Center for the Advancement for the Blind in Safed, said she is frustrated by the lack of support her organization receives.

“Part of the problem is that when people do become blind, they have no idea what their resources are, what is available for them,” said Cohen, who was in Toronto recently to raise awareness of the centre. “There are few social workers working with the blind in Israel who really have the ability or the time to function with the blind.

“I’m trying to commission Partnership 2000 people in the different locations [to help].”

Under the Partnership 2000 program launched by the Jewish Agency for Israel in 1994, communities in Israel are twinned with cities in the Diaspora, with the goal of strengthening Israeli society.

But the organization is not interested in educating the blind, she said.

“Part of our mission is to try to make the Partnership 2000 communities aware of the needs of people within their communities who, until now, have been completely overlooked,” said Cohen, who was the first Canadian to make aliyah after the Gulf War 15 years ago. She has been working for Beit Yael for six years.

Beit Yael, which has been offering resources to help the blind gain their independence for more than 30 years, provides services that are unlike anything else in Israel or many other places in the world, she said.

“Our challenge is to empower people who are vision-impaired, whether they were born that way [or] they have become that way, and to make them capable of functioning on a dynamic basis.

“We empower people by teaching them how to walk with a cane, teaching them how to cook, teaching them to take care of themselves on a physical

level and just become independent,” Cohen said.

Among the services the centre offers are counselling and guidance, research, early detection and rehabilitation of blind and vision-impaired newborns, a Hebrew ulpan for low-vision and blind immigrants, and crafts and activities for the elderly with sight problems.

Beit Yael, which is strictly kosher, offers two residential programs each year, a study camp for children age nine to 13 and a residential rehabilitation program for adults over 40. Both programs run from Sunday to Thursday so that participants can go home for the weekends to experience Shabbat with their families, Cohen said.

She described the summer camp program. “There are about 900 vision-impaired kids in Israel of whom about 300 live in the north. We want them to have a fun kind of camp just like sighted kids.

“So we take them boating, rafting, horseback riding, on jeep tours, and we have access to a therapeutic swimming pool... They just have a wonderful time.”

Although it costs about \$400 to send a child to the camp, the child is only responsible for \$60 and the centre raises the rest. Beit Yael gets some support from the Ministry of Social Affairs of the Israeli Government, but it relies heavily on private donations, Cohen said.

The residential rehabilitation program runs once a year, she said. “For one month, people come to live with us from Sunday to Thursday. We can take 15 people and we start with the very basics. These are people who are newly blind or going blind. There are about 2,000 people who fall into this category each year.”

Once the participants are screened to ensure they are mentally prepared and are genuinely interested in the program, teachers provided by Migdal Ohr (Hebrew for “lighthouse”), an Israeli organization that provides education and social guidance to the underprivileged, begin to teach them how to cope with their disability.

“It is an incredibly rewarding job because on a daily basis, you see how important what we are doing is and the impact we have in people’s lives,” Cohen said, adding that about 200 people have gone through the program successfully.

“Now I have glaucoma, and I’m even more aware of the challenges faced by people who wake up one morning and don’t know they have had it. It is so important to get your eyes checked,” Cohen advised.

For more information about the centre, visit www.beityael.org.

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