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Sderot, El Salvador teens relax at Camp Geshet

By RITA POLIAKOV, CJN Intern
Thursday, 14 August 2008



TORONTO — Lunchtime's almost over at Camp Geshet and several teenagers from Sderot, who were shy and quiet only moments before, begin to bang on the table while listening happily to other campers singing Love Potion No. 9.

Teens from Sderot enjoy a boat ride at Camp Geshet. From left are Ilana Katanov, Tamara Igaev, Shalom Katar and Sean Kuchnik.

A girl smiles and sways, making eye contact with a counsellor for the first time since lunch started. And suddenly they are different kids, laughing, banging on the table and playing clapping games with fellow campers.

Suddenly Sderot is far away, and it's almost time for a boat ride.

These teenagers from Sderot, along with four girls from El Salvador, were brought to Camp Geshet this year by Yaldeinu, an organization that is dedicated to preserving Judaic values through formal and informal education, with help from the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem.

"There are communities out there, unlike North America... that aren't being supported and are in serious need of resources and financial aid for Jewish education," said Michael Ettegui, founder of Yaldeinu.

It's because of this need that Yaldeinu helped send nine kids, aged 14 to 18, to Camp Geshet this summer.

Camp, to the teens from Sderot, is a distraction from almost daily missile attacks in their hometown.

To the girls from El Salvador, who are part of a small Jewish minority with only one synagogue for the entire community, it is a chance to connect with their religion.

In El Salvador "people just don't know Jews. It's such an insignificant minority that Judaism is very foreign," Ettegui said. "It's important for [Jews in El Salvador] to understand other communities and have personal relationships with Jews from around the world. They will learn that they're part of a people."

Ettegui chose to work with Camp Geshet partly because of its status as a Zionist, non-profit camp. Located three hours from Toronto in Cloyne, Ont., the camp offers Jewish educational programming.

Along with water activities, drama, and arts and crafts, campers learn about Israel and social justice in terms of Judaism through planned activities and discussion groups.

Andrea Stanley, one of the teens from El Salvador, is enjoying the mix of Jewish education and socializing

"I've been here a week and I'm really liking it," Stanley, 15, said. "I get to meet different people, play different games and activities. The Jewish education [here] is good. It's a little more different. They make learning how to be Jewish fun. There's always a lesson behind every game."

For the teens from El Salvador, most of whom speak fluent English, the transition to Camp Geshet has been smooth. For the Israelis from Sderot, the process has been a little more difficult.

"The Spanish kids don't come from a war zone. They know nothing will happen to their families in three weeks," Ettegui said.

The campers from Sderot "have all lived in a city that's sustained over 8,000 rocket attacks and have lived with all of the trauma that comes with that," Ettegui said.

"The parents are happy their children are in Canada, while the children are concerned about their families back home. They want to have fun, but they can't get those thoughts of fear out of their minds."

While the campers from Sderot are dealing with homesickness, they're also beginning to get comfortable at camp.

Yaldeinu founder Michael Ettegui and four teens from El Salvador at Camp Geshet. From left are Mishel Ponsa, Ettegui, Paola Salazar, Adriana Sternfels and Andrea Stanley.



Camp director Shaul Zobary has high hopes for these teens.

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"A week from now it'll be a different picture - they won't want to leave camp. They went fishing. They enjoy it very much," he said.

"The thing is, they have a hard time communicating. Counsellors bring them into discussions. We have a lot of counsellors that speak Hebrew, which makes it easier. I think [the teens are] going to completely change."

Apart from helping Jews from Sderot and El Salvador, Ettegui would like to help Canadians connect with other Jewish communities.

Through such contact, Canadians would learn a great deal about Jewish life, he said. "It will put a face to the news reports regarding the situation in Sderot. It will reinforce their love for Israel, it's got to."

Yaldeinu, which is less than a year old, also donates money to Jewish day schools in places such as Latin America. Ettegui hopes to create followup programs for the international campers and to eventually expand the program to different camps.

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