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Yaldeinu is all about the kids, founder says

Written by Shlomo Kapustin
Friday, 01 August 2008

TORONTO – For Michael Ettetdgui and his organization, it's all about the children.

If the young organization's name, Yaldeinu (our children in Hebrew), doesn't make this clear enough, then peruse its web site's landing page, where an angelic, prepubescent girl greets all comers at eye level, fair, wispy hair brushed back, head lying sideways on dainty wrists.

And if it's substance that's of interest, consider the group's ambitious goal: To fund formal and informal Jewish education in hand-picked communities abroad.

Launched in Toronto in October 2007, Yaldeinu provides scholarships and 'camperships' to help underprivileged Jewish children attend Jewish day schools and camps. Infused with Zionist values, the organization currently focuses on Central and Latin American countries such as Uruguay, Bolivia and El Salvador and is looking forward to future projects with children from the former Soviet Union and North Africa.

Ettetdgui, its 26-year-old founder and executive director, comes by his commitment to Jewish education honestly.

Growing up in Thornhill, he attended day school until Grade 3 – at the Sephardic school Or Haemet – after which he entered the public system.

"In hindsight, it would have been more beneficial had I gone to Jewish day school," he said recently. "I want to give as many Jewish children a chance to go to Jewish day school as I can."

In less than a month, Yaldeinu's more informal side will gear up in Ontario, when children will arrive for a three-week stay at Camp Geshet, which is part of the Habonim Dror movement. While 4 of the the 10 visitors live in El Salvador, the rest call Sderot home, currently hard-hit by Qassam rocket attacks from the Gaza strip. The program is in cooperation with One Family Fund Canada and the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem.

"[We] also wanted... to reach out to Jewish children in Sderot and teach children in Toronto and Ontario what it feels like to be in Israel, Ettetdgui said."

The camping experience is a familiar one for Ettetdgui, as he worked for three summers at Camp Torolago, which also brought Israeli youngsters to Canada for "Zionist instruction and Jewish inspiration" – and for a respite from their terror-riven lives.

"I got to see it happen first-hand," Ettetdgui said, "the experience of watching Canadian children and Israeli children interact.... It's experiential learning at its best when you put an Israeli child in a cabin with a Canadian child – what you learn about each other."

Indeed, the Jewish state is never far from Ettetdgui's mind.

"Israel is the cornerstone of my identity. It informs my everyday life."

Yaldeinu is not the organization's full name; it's also known as the Marcos Soberano Society for Jewish Education and Camping. Soberano, who died in March 2005, was Ettetdgui's maternal grandfather.

"We were very, very close," Ettetdgui said. "He was an inspiration, a consummate teacher, strict but very, very kind, and a very hard worker."

Soberano, who arrived with his wife and 10 children in Canada in 1964, continued the banking career he had left in Morocco, and according to Ettetdgui, he put a premium on education and learning.

"This is an organization he would be very, very proud of."

While Yaldeinu has secured funding from community philanthropists and leaders, fundraising efforts are being ramped up with the recent announcement of the group's first major fundraiser.

"Yaldeinu presents Project Campfire," Ettetdgui said in a recent press release. "Hosted over Labour Day weekend, Project Campfire's inaugural festival will combine music, art, cuisine and culture in an effort to raise funds for Jewish children in Israel and developing countries to attend summer camps in Ontario."

Held on the new site of Camp Torolago Retreat Centre in Ameliasburg, ON, the weekend retreat will include water and land sports, hiking, outdoor concerts and various workshops. Guests will be able to rent cabins and cottages for private lodging.

More information about the event is available at www.projectcampfirefestival.org or by calling the Yaldeinu office at **(905) 482-3374**.

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