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Canadians visit patients at Save a Child's Heart

By SHERI SHEFA, Staff Reporter
 Thursday, 31 January 2008

When nearly 50 Canadian Jews travelled to Israel on a 10-day tour earlier this month, they knew they'd be visiting children who are waiting for life-saving heart surgery funded by a humanitarian organization, but they weren't sure what to expect.



Lindsay Malet, right, a JUMP participant, holds Tara, an Iraqi heart patient who is in Israel to receive free life-saving surgery courtesy of Save a Child's Heart. [Sheri Shefa photo]

Generation Y Visits Israel

The visit to Save a Child's Heart (SACH), a non-profit organization based in Holon that treats children from all over the world with congenital heart problems, was part of a tikkun olam theme on a post-birthright, subsidized Israel tour for Jewish students and young professionals, organized by Jewish Urban Meeting Place (JUMP), a new group that works to give young Jews the opportunity to stay connected to the community.

The participants brought toys and school supplies to the children, who are brought to the SACH house in Holon from Africa, Asia, South America, Europe and the Middle East, where they stay while awaiting free surgery at the nearby Wolfson Medical Center.

What would the atmosphere in the house be like? Would the children be weak and withdrawn, sick and sad?

The participants found dedicated staff, volunteers and nurses who lived in the home to make the children's stay in Israel as comfortable as possible, and 17 kids between the ages of six months and 17 years, who were excited to play and laugh with their visitors.

Laura Kafif, the house mother, talked about her admiration for the children's strength and bravery during such a difficult time.

"To be here, sometimes without a mother, [coming] from a village all the way to Israel to undergo a surgery - it's quite a traumatic thing for them. Actually, the children are amazing. If it was me that was going through it, I wouldn't be half as good as they are," Kafif said.

In the hope of brightening up their day, participants brought the children toys and supplies including dolls, colouring books, markers, cards and board games.

The need for these things that most North American kids take for granted became apparent when Kafif explained that these children, most of whom come from poor villages in Africa and the Middle East, don't have access to them.

"Basically the things that we do here are things that we would do in the gan [preschool]. Don't forget that these children come from villages where they don't have a lot of toys, they don't have a lot of paper or crayons or things like that," Kafif said.

Tova Vertes, a Canadian student from Dundas, Ont., who was completing her three-month stay in the home, talked about the importance of her role as a volunteer and reflected on the impact that it had on her.

"It's been an amazing experience, and I really learned a lot about how to deal with children... We have learning barriers and cultural barriers, and the first couple of weeks that you come here are very difficult, but then... you find ways of doing things that make them happy without speaking too much English."

Since SACH was established in 1996, 1,800 children have been treated by Israeli doctors at the Wolfson Medical Center, where SACH has an agreement that permits the organization to use all the facilities of the hospital, provided that they are able to raise funds to supplement the cost.

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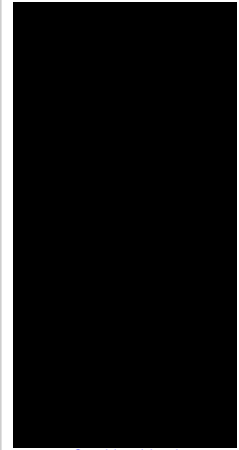
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"It costs \$10,000 for each child. Seven thousand dollars goes to the hospital for whatever they need, whether it covers just a tiny little bit [of the cost] or it covers nine months of treatment, and the rest is for plane fare, housing, food and things like that," said Jonah Mink, SACH's student co-ordinator.

"All of our donations are private donations. The EU [European Union] gave us 1.5 million Euro to treat Palestinians and start a fellowship program for Palestinian doctors."

In addition to creating fellowship programs to train doctors around the world, doctors and volunteers associated with SACH go on medical missions every year to less-developed countries to evaluate potential patients.

Kafif said that on a mission to Panama last year, she recalled seeing families – children and their parents – sitting on the floors of the hospital courtyards waiting to be seen by doctors.

"It's like something you've seen in a documentary. Until you see it with your own eyes, it's really difficult to imagine."

She said that on their most recent trip, an Israeli delegation travelled to Amman, Jordan, to set up a clinic at the Red Crescent Hospital. SACH doctors, including Dr. Sion Hourli, the director of the pediatric intensive care unit at Wolfson Medical Center, screened 38 Iraqi children. Although they were able to arrange to treat a majority of the Iraqi children, some of the patients were beyond help.

"They actually had to sit and tell them, 'I'm sorry we can't help you with your child.' That was very difficult," Kafif said.

Among the group of children that the doctors were able to treat was Tara.

When the doctors first saw Tara, she was five months old and underweight. Her skin was blue because of a lack of oxygen in her blood.

Tara was suffering from a cyanotic heart disease, a congenital heart defect that results in low blood oxygen levels, and she would surely die if not treated immediately.

"She was surviving by a connection [from the lungs] to the two main arteries that only exists in utero," Hourli told The CJN three months ago, just days after Tara's first surgery.

"We just added a tube to bring more blood to the lungs and we decided she was too sick to have the final surgery at this stage."

Tara's mother, who travelled with her daughter to Israel, has been living in the SACH house for the past three months and is currently waiting for the final surgery. During JUMP's visit to the house, the participants were able to interact with Tara, who has gained strength and weight since her first surgery.

Mink is currently touring Canadian campuses as part of a SACH tour put together by National Jewish Campus Life (NJCL) and the Canadian Federation of Jewish Students (CFJS) to raise awareness about the organization.

Mink, who already visited Edmonton, Calgary and Saskatoon, will travel to Vancouver, Victoria, Toronto, Ottawa, Halifax, Montreal, St. Catharines and London.

For more information, contact Mink at student@saveachildsheart.org.

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