



Inessa Rifkin

Revisiting the kids of Sderot

By Inessa Rifkin

Last summer, the Russian School of Mathematics and Shaloh House hosted 19 children from Sderot, Israel. My daughter, Masha, instigated this project after she first visited Sderot during her semester abroad in Israel, and the Russian Jewish Community Foundation (RJCF) made this project possi-

ble by leading a very successful fundraising campaign. After we left Sderot we visited many of our friends and relatives. It was depressing to discover that none of them understand the situation in Sderot. They know that Kassams are falling; but how scary it is, what it does to people's lives, how often it is – they know nothing! The media in Israel excludes these parts, and understandably so. The situation was worsened by the government's action in Gush Katif. Naturally, the government does not want the media to expose the true situation.

How can we help? In my opinion there is only one way. We must help the people of Sderot build a community for themselves. They should spend time together and create new relationships, which will sustain and support them. They need a safe place to gather. Our first bomb shelter is ready. Its capacity is for 20 people. We are going to have classes for children and adults there as well as community celebrations.

We can help by giving the people of Sderot as much of a return to normalcy as possible. We need at least two computers in our safe-play-room/bomb shelter. We need to pay English teachers, dance teachers, yoga teachers; we need some furniture for the shelter, and we have to start planning the summer. It would be ideal to be able to take some children out of Sderot for the summer, to any location in Israel. Your ideas are very welcome. Your help is needed. This is our community's project. We can do it all together. We did it once. We must continue. The children of Sderot must know we will not abandon them.

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Masha wrote a play based on life in Sderot, using nine of the children as the actors. The children not only had a relaxing and safe summer in New England, but also shared their lives with us through the play – shown in Brighton, Lynn, and New York. In November, my husband and I visited Sderot and met with the children and their families.

We were so happy to see our Sderot children, still talking about their trip to Boston as the highlight of their lives. It was even more overwhelming to learn that, for most of them, it became easier to cope with the "Tseva Adom" sirens after the play. It was heartbreaking to see how our actions moved their parents.

We did it! We brought happy moments to many homes. We affected more than just those 19 families: I was stopped on the streets of Sderot as people thanked me for Masha, and asked why we let her stay in Sderot during the heaviest bombing ever; why we care. Our answer was one and the same: We care because we could have been in their place with our own children today. We could have been as helpless as they are. Somebody must care.

Inessa Rifkin is a Newton resident and a co-founder of the Russian School of Mathematics.

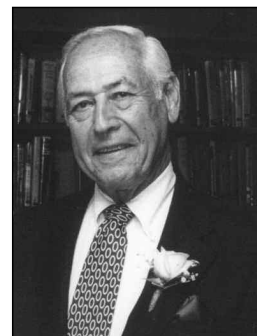
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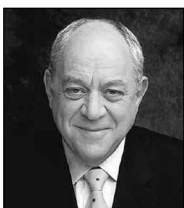
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