

Centre gives Jerusalem neighbourhood new hope

By WENDY ELLIMAN
IPS

JERUSALEM — The two oldest children of Yulia, a divorced mother of four who made aliyah from Russia six years ago, were poor students who found math and English especially unfathomable. One scraped through his matriculation, his grades too poor to get him much further. The other failed to matriculate at all.

Yulia is determined that her two younger children, now in grades 4 and 6, will do better.

In the fall, they will attend a new centre, the Israel Asper Community Action Center, that will provide resources to help children improve their educational achievements.

"They know all about the computer as a toy, judging by the time they spend playing computer games," Yulia says. "But soon they'll have a chance to use the computer to improve their math and English through specially designed programs."



Ethiopian youngsters take a break from studying math at the Asper Community Action Center and play a computer game. [IPS photo]

The centre, which was dedicated in early June, is the fourth in a lengthening chain of Community Action centres built as an initiative of Canada's 24-year-old Asper Foundation, in partnership with Jewish National Fund (JNF) of Canada.

"In the past four years, we've initiated centres in Ofakim, Migdal HaEmek and Be'er Sheva, but it was important to us to be in our beloved Jerusalem as well," says the foundation's managing director, Gail Sheryl Asper, a Winnipeg-born lawyer who directs CanWest Global Communications Corporation and the CanWest Global Foundation.

"As Israel is the soul of the Jewish people, so Jerusalem is the soul of Israel. And once we began planning in Jerusalem, we found a wonderful partner [for this centre] in the

Jerusalem Foundation," Asper says.

The centre is in the city's Ramot Alon neighbourhood, which is home to veteran Israelis and immigrants, mainly from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. Established in 1974 and today home to 47,000 people, Ramot's social and economic future now hangs in the balance.

"This was once a pluralistic community of secular, religious and [haredi] veterans and newcomers," says Ramot Alon Community Center chair Ze'evik Landner, who has lived in the neighbourhood for the past 24 years. "Although there is still one section consisting of beautifully landscaped homes and apartment buildings owned by affluent and upper-middle class residents, many of them have moved out. Now there are mostly large pockets of... areas facing poverty and social problems. We must invest in our community to stop its slide into a downward spiral."

The investment shared by the Asper Foundation, the Jerusalem Foundation and Canadian JNF is close to \$350,000, a portion of which will go to renovating premises provided for the centre by the Jerusalem municipality. The lion's share, however, will go to finance educational enrichment programs and activities largely geared toward disadvantaged youngsters. It will also serve as a multicultural meeting place for residents from vastly different backgrounds, and enable the new immigrant population to integrate into the general population of the neighbourhood.

One of the centre's four sections will be for youngsters like Yulia's. Its tutors will help with homework and oversee computer courses that reinforce English and math based on the school syllabus. A second section for younger

children will have supervised games and toys, computer games for infants and a puppet theatre. Teens will be given "green" tools in the centre's third section, where a unique program run in tandem with the JNF will operate. Through field trips and day and summer camps, the youngsters will learn leadership skills, Zionism, Israeli history and how to maintain a green environment.

The fourth section will be a computer lab with 20 computer stations, which will teach kindergartners the three Rs in preparation for first grade and include educational games. The computer lab will also be used to train teens to become computer instructors, all the way to website-building; and it will provide unemployed residents with computer training and young couples with a family budget planning course.

"As we've seen at our three community

action centres already up and running, these are places that can provide educational support beyond the reach of the school system," Asper says. "While they particularly help youngsters with educational difficulties or children from deprived families, their combination of technology-oriented education and teaching of leadership skills and heritage can help all comers achieve their optimal educational level."

"I believe that the Israel Asper Community Action Center will become the breathing heart and center of community life in Ramot Alon," Landner says. "Perhaps it will hold the key to a brighter and better future for Ramot's deprived youngsters. At the very least, it will bring children and families from vastly different backgrounds and beliefs together under one roof."

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