

## Ofakim's Asper Center: A Lively Social Meeting Point



Youth Leader Itamar Dagan with young scouts

Since its opening seven years ago, the Asper Community Action Center has been home to educational and social activities for young people in Ofakim, with special emphasis on ecology and Zionism. Dozens of children and teenagers attend the center every day to take part in a variety of activities. In the morning, local schoolchildren come to enjoy an educational experience at the learning center, and pupils from the fourth to the sixth grade engage in activities related to Zionism and the environment together with their teachers, under the guidance of KKL-JNF volunteers.

In the afternoons, KKL-JNF runs a scouting group where children get to know and love the Israeli countryside. Members of youth movements and local social groups visit the center and take part in a variety of social activities.



The Action Center was established thanks to the financial support of the 2003 Negev Gala Honouree, Rev. John Howson, the 2004 Negev Gala Honouree, Miriam Maltz, and the community of Winnipeg. The Center's educational wing was set up through the financial



backing of Marie Doduck, 2004 Negev Dinner Honouree, and the community of Vancouver.

Nineteen-year-old **Itamar Dagan** from Nahalal is an instructor in KKL-JNF's scouting group, as part of his one-year-program volunteer service at Ofakim. "The Asper Center is the perfect place for people to learn to love the countryside and nature and to become aware of environmental issues," he said. "We meet here once a week, and this rich learning environment helps us a great deal as we teach children how to love and appreciate the Land of Israel."

"We think it's very important to instill ecological and Zionist messages in young people," explains **Oranit Hoffi**, a coordinator in KKL-JNF's Education and Youth Division. "The study center is used by teaching staff, students and young people, who, as Israel's future leaders, will continue KKL-JNF's work." Visitors to the center enjoy a uniquely enriching environment that includes models and pictures representing important periods in the history of the State of Israel. The exhibition includes a model of a table from a tower and stockade settlement, a picture of the Declaration of the State in 1948, photographs of early agriculture and settlements, and portraits of Zionist leaders such as Ben Gurion, Jabotinsky, Herzl and Trumpeldor.



(R-L): Liat and Lior Weizmann together with a friend in front of a KKL-JNF model display

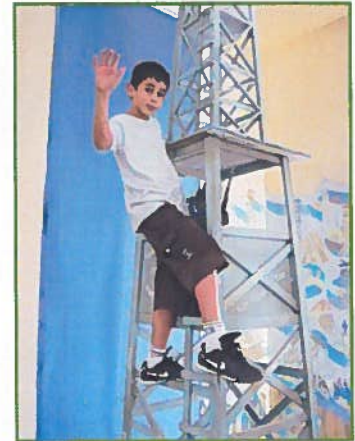
A special exhibition uses visual aids and audio to portray KKL-JNF's wide range of activities in different fields, such as providing reservoirs and other water resources, developing tourist sites, establishing communities, preparing agricultural infrastructure and more. The exhibition gives visitors the opportunity to learn about ecological Zionism in the areas of environmental conservation, sustainable development, ecology, water projects, settlement, Jewish and Zionist history, and a variety of other subjects.

According to **Daniel Ori**, director of children, youth and community activities at Ofakim Community Center, the Asper Center campus encompasses all local activity for youth. "Apart from Zionist and ecological issues, the various programs include leisure activities and learning life skills, community involvement and leadership," he explains.



"We don't want the place to be a museum, we want it to be a focal point for social activities where children will come and spend time. We want youth to be gain from their experience here, and at the same time, have a say in what happens at the center.

**Liat Weizmann** (12) is taking part in KKL-JNF's scouting group, together with her younger brother **Lior**. "It's lots of fun, because we're learning all about Israel. And we visited the Asper Center with the school, too, a few times, to learn about the history of the State and KKL-JNF activities. The models here make what we learn at school seem real, and that's much more interesting than just reading



a book or listening to the teacher explain it," she said." "This is my first year in the scouting group,' ten-year old Lior adds, "and I'm really enjoying getting to know the country better. My sister told me what fun it was, so I joined too."



**Daniel Ori- Director, Children, Youth and Community Activities**

The center is filled with the sound of happy children's laughter. One by one they arrive, waiting for the activities to begin. Meanwhile they move around, looking at the exhibits that portray the history of the State, and they have no qualms about having fun with the historic artifacts on display. One child does 'rabbit ears' on the head of state visionary Herzl while posing for a photo, while another climbs onto a model of a guard tower, as if he were a pioneer from the period of the British Mandate. Thus, while they play, they absorb something of the history of their country.

One group which holds activities at the Asper Center is the **Krembo Wings** youth movement for children with special needs, in which around 100 youngsters and volunteers take part. There are children with cerebral palsy, autism and mental development problems. "We hold social activities with them just like any other youth movement," says **Gilad Blum**, the movement's coordinator in Ofakim.

Gilad is a combat soldier in the army's Nahal unit, who is now in the social phase of his service in the IDF. Gilad is volunteering at Ofakim together with another ten soldiers from his *garin* (core group). "With the youngsters' help, we create a special place and make each person feel a special significance in working our way towards social change," explains the enthusiastic young volunteer.



**Gilad Blum with other Krembo Wings youth leaders**

It is through all of these programs that the Asper Center has become a major focal point for the town's social life, using a variety of community activities to bring different sectors of Ofakim's population together.