

# Delivering hope to community

Canadian-supported Asper centre in Jerusalem gives new life to lagging neighborhood.

WENDY ELLIMAN ISRAEL PRESS SERVICE

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

Despite the challenge, Yulia is determined that her two younger children (fourth and sixth graders) will do better when, in the fall, they begin attending a centre that provides resources enabling children to improve their educational achievements.

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

The new centre, which was dedicated in early June, is the fourth in a lengthening chain of community action facilities built at the initiative of the 24-year-old Asper Foundation of Canada, in partnership with Canada's Jewish National Fund.

"In the past four years, we've initiated centres in Ofakim, Migdal HaEmek and Be'ersheba, but it was important to us to be in our beloved Jerusalem as well," said Asper Foundation managing director Gail Asper. "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 in the Jerusalem Foundation."

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

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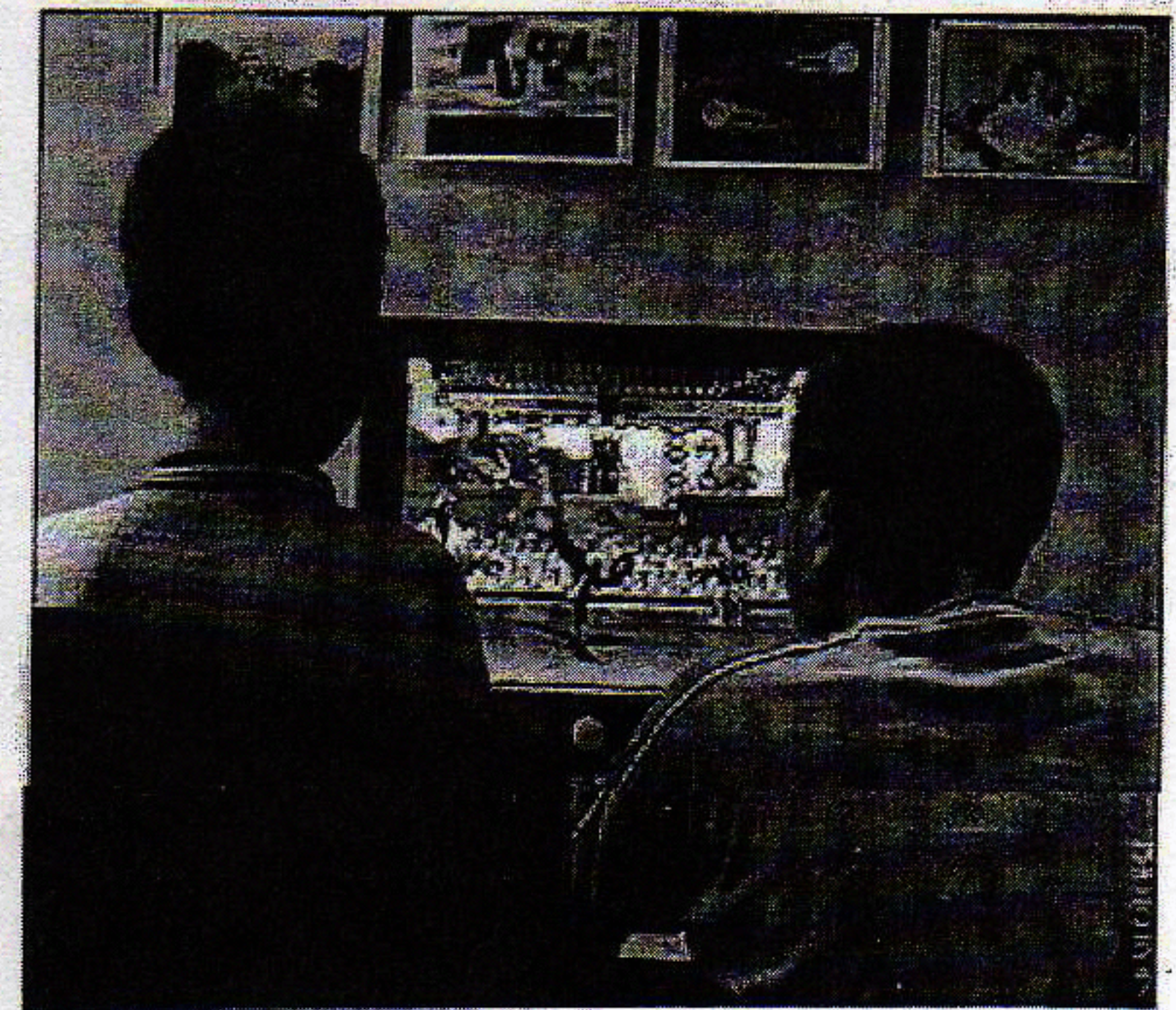
"This was once a pluralistic community of secular, religious and ultra-Orthodox veterans and newcomers," said Ramot Alon Community Centre chairman Ze'evik Landner, who has lived in the neighborhood for the past 24 years. "Although there is still one section consisting of beautifully landscaped homes and apartment buildings owned by affluent and upper-middle class residents, many of them have moved out. Now, there are mostly large pockets of secular and ultra-Orthodox areas facing poverty and social problems. We must invest in our community to stop it

sliding 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 towards financing 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 neighborhood.

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 in line with 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 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 action centre's fourth section will be a computer lab with 20 stations, which will extend from teaching kindergartners the three Rs in preparation for first grade and educational games and training for teens



Ethiopian youngsters take a break from studying math at the Asper Community Action Centre to play a computer game.

as computer instructors, all the way to website-building, providing unemployed residents with computer know-how 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," said Asper. "While they particularly help youngsters with educational difficulties or children from deprived families, their combination of technology-oriented ed-

ucation and teaching of leadership skills and heritage can help all comers achieve their optimal educational level."

"I believe that the Israel Asper Community Action Centre will become the breathing heart and centre of community life in Ramot Alon," added Landner. "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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