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A step forward

The Jaffa Institute is giving kids the chance to break the cycle of poverty and set their goals higher

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'Thank you for giving me a future'

The Jaffa Institute, founded by a new-immigrant social worker and an Israeli war hero turned fund-raiser to help kids and their parents break the cycle of poverty, is a family operation in more ways than one

• By YOCHEVED MIRIAM RUSSO

Until he was six, "Motti" enjoyed everything a warm, loving family could provide. His father, a taxi driver, earned enough to provide a comfortable, if modest, Tel Aviv home. His mother stayed home, caring for Motti and his seven brothers and sisters.

Life was good – until disaster struck: Motti's father died. The family foundered.

With no marketable skills, Motti's mother considered herself lucky to get work as a cleaner in the Tel Aviv central bus station, even though she earned little and worked achingly long hours. No longer able to afford the Tel Aviv house, the family moved to a run-down apartment on a crime-ridden street in an impoverished neighborhood of Jaffa.

Now when school was over, no hot lunch awaited the kids – in fact, with increasing frequency, there was little food in the house at all. The children learned to survive on one meal a day: pita with chocolate spread.

Hungry, tired and listless, still traumatized by the change in his life, Motti began to fall behind in school. Embarrassed by what felt like constant failure, he looked for ways to avoid school entirely.

In short, by his seventh birthday, Motti was well on his way to becoming a Jaffa statistic: one more child lost to illiteracy and the drugs, delinquency, prostitution and crime that frequently follow.

It was the "Mottis" of Jaffa that motivated David Portowicz, a newly minted Brandeis University PhD in social work, to set about changing things.

"It was 1974, and I'd just completed my PhD class-work when we made aliya from Boston," the energetic Portowicz recalls. "I was 'ABD' – 'all but dissertation' – and came to work in Tel Aviv as a social worker while writing my thesis, a study of what factors made underprivileged kids fail in school.

"I was sent to Jaffa – then, as now, one of Israel's most poverty-stricken communities: 70,000 residents, over half of them on welfare, with 53 percent of the kids dropping out of school before graduating.

"I wanted to work with the kids. If there was a way to end this devastating cycle of poverty, they were the key."

The thesis took longer than Portowicz expected.

"I spent seven years working on that doggone thing," he laughs, "but the work was an education in itself. Because of everything I saw in Jaffa, day after day, I promised myself one thing: If I ever did manage to finish it, I was going to devote my life to the children of Jaffa.

"You know what really blew me away?" Portowicz asks. "You could walk the streets of Jaffa all day long and never see a single kid with a schoolbag on his



'THE CHILD has to want to be helped. If he or she doesn't want to be here, there's not much we can do,' says Dana Karni, head of educational programming at the Jaffa Institute. (Marc Israel Sellem)

back. There was the problem right there – kids were dropping out of school. What kind of a life could they possibly have with no education?

"As I talked and listened to these kids and saw what was happening, it seemed clear to me that many of the reasons for their failure in school could be resolved with a little bit of help. We started by taking a group of 16 kids under our wing, offering them an after-school program to make use of those afternoon hours when they were usually left on their own with

If we can get a child reading, the probability he will fit into society is very high. It just makes my day when I see some of the wildest kids we had sitting in the library, reading
– Dana Karni

nothing to do but hang out on the streets.

"We started tutoring, encouraging them, helping them keep up with their classes. Then we realized it wasn't just tutoring they needed – all too often, the kids were hungry. They can't learn if they're hungry, so we started feeding them. Then we realized that some had additional special needs, so one by one we

started working with those issues.

"It kept growing and growing, but everything that followed flowed from that first after-school program."

Today the Jaffa Institute, formally founded in 1982 by Portowicz and Israeli war hero turned fund-raiser Ze'ev "Zonik" Shaham, runs some 30 different and individualistic programs from a myriad sites, all of them designed to help kids and their families break the cycle of poverty.

"We're focused – but not too focused," Portowicz explains. "There are multiple reasons for poverty and underachievement – psychological, motivational, educational and physiological among them. You have to deal with them all. We give them 'big brothers,' to help keep them out of trouble, we founded residential homes to take them in if they're removed from their parents' houses. We feed them, help them with their homework, enrich their lives with art and music, introduce them to libraries and the joy of reading.

"Each kid might have a different problem, but the goal is always the same: Keep the kid in school by helping him keep up with his peers who come from better homes with more support."

THE 16 kids Portowicz started with grew to 100 the second year. Today, the Jaffa Institute's four intensive *moadoniot* – after-school activity centers – flourish in Jaffa, south Tel Aviv and Bat Yam. Each offers a vast array of educational enhancement programs for first through sixth grades, five days a week, 10 months a year, from 1 to 6 p.m.

"On days when the regular schools are closed, full-day activities keep the kids busy and learning. Nor are summers wasted. During summer vacation, the institute runs summer camps kids look forward to all year long.

Walk into the Jaffa *moadonit* – officially called the "Pahad Yitzhak Afterschool Activity Center" – and the



'IT'S NOT always poverty – sometimes it's just a lack of knowledge. The parents just don't know how to provide the kind of intellectual stimulation kids need to grow and thrive,' says Karni. (Marc Israel Sellem)

The institute's four intensive after-school activity centers flourish in Jaffa, south Tel Aviv and Bat Yam, offering myriad educational enhancement programs from 1 to 6 p.m – the hours when many children left on their own hang out on the streets

one thing you can't miss are all the smiles. Each of the four centers serves kids who live in the immediate neighborhood, so immigrant Ethiopians and Russians mix with native Israelis, including Muslim girls in head scarves.

Today's highlight is a karaoke party, and already a couple of hundred kids are sitting jam-packed into a big recreation room, talking and laughing, waiting for things to get under way.

Music begins, and a song leader starts singing. Soon everyone joins in. The leader walks around with her microphone, letting first this kid and then that sing for the others. Some are real hams, others hang back, but the enthusiasm – along with the willingness to perform – seems contagious.

Dana Karni, head of educational programming for the Jaffa Institute, describes how the centers function.

"We work very closely with social services, as well as with school counselors, advisers and teachers. They identify kids who are struggling in school and recommend them to us. We take the more difficult cases, kids who haven't been accepted into other programs. Quite honestly, we're the last stop before the child is taken out of the family home and sent to a boarding school.

"But the child has to want to be helped. If he or she doesn't want to be here, there's not much we can do. We have about 300 at-risk kids at this center at any given time."

Why does Israel seem to have so many "at-risk" kids? While admitting it might take a book to answer that question, Karni says much of it results from Israel being a nation of immigrants.

"New immigrants usually struggle to make ends meet," she says. "Many of these kids have two parents, both working – some of them working two jobs. But the parents probably don't have much Hebrew, and they're working at low-paying jobs. There's no

money for anything extra at all – sometimes not even enough food – and no time to indulge the kids in anything like taking them to zoos, museums or art galleries, encourage them in music or other cultural activities.

"What happens is that the kids start to fall behind, but there's no one at home to stop the slide. The parents are gone, no one helps with homework, there are no books or games, there's just no stimulation, nothing creative to catch a child's attention.

"Understand, it's not always poverty – sometimes it's just a lack of knowledge. The parents just don't know how to provide the kind of intellectual stimulation kids need to grow and thrive. In any case, the kids don't learn. It's not that they can't, it's just that they haven't had the chance."

If ever the phrase "in loco parentis" – in the place of a parent – applies, it's at these activity centers.

"The kids come here right after school, and the first thing we do is feed them a good, hot, healthy lunch, just like a mother would," Karni says. "The menu is different every day, but always includes meat, vegetables, salads, rice or pasta. Then they meet with their group to do their homework.

"A group consists of about 15 kids plus two adults, one a teacher, the other a trained aide. The teachers live with these kids five hours a day, five days a week. They get to know them and their family situations very well.

"After homework, we offer cultural activities of some kind – it might be art, crafts, music, dance, sports, therapy in some form, or just spending time in the library.

"One thing I insist upon, in each center, is a library filled with books. Having books to read is absolutely critical to the process. If we can get a child reading, the probability he will fit into society is very high. It just makes my day when I see some of the wildest kids we had, and now they're sitting in the library, reading.

It makes me know we're doing something right."

OFTEN, IT'S the little things that count.

"One of our teachers noticed that a little boy started struggling at about 4 p.m. every day. She didn't know what the problem was, but late in the afternoon he'd become anxious and upset, sometimes even crying. She visited his home and discovered that construction work was being done nearby at night, and he couldn't sleep. His 4 p.m. problems came about because he was totally exhausted. We found a place for him to nap every day for an hour, and everything went back to normal."

It's still surprising to discover that lack of food can be a major issue in modern Israel, but in Jaffa it is.

"One of our social workers discovered that one little boy, nine years old, hadn't been to school for several days. She went to his home and talked with his mother, a single woman with two children. The mother had a job and was working, but she admitted she hadn't sent her sons to school for several days. Why not? Because she didn't have enough money to send sandwiches with them. And if she didn't send sandwiches, the teacher would call her, and she'd be profoundly embarrassed.

"She was working, trying so hard, and it hurt her to admit she didn't have money, so she decided not to send the children to school. Both children were referred to us, and now they get a hot meal every day. In fact, for those kids, we do a little bit better. We always have some food left after the lunches, so whatever leftovers there are go home with them.

"Sad as the situation was, I understand that mother," Karni says. "She was doing everything she possibly could to care for her family, and having to admit failure, day after day, in response to the teacher's phone call, was just too much.

"Fortunately, this problem was easy to solve. Now the



'EACH KID might have a different problem, but the goal is always the same,' says the institute's founder David Portowicz. 'Keep the kid in school by helping him keep up with his peers who come from better homes with more support.'



Twenty years ago, we did a little survey, asked kids what they wanted to be when they grew up. We heard 'plumber,' 'porter,' 'janitor,' 'factory worker.' What do we hear now? 'Doctor,' 'lawyer,' 'scientist,' 'engineer,' 'software designer.' They've gotten the message: They can succeed just like anyone else in whatever they want
– David Portowicz

boys are eating better, they're getting help with homework, they're active in all kinds of enrichment programs, they're doing well in school. These kids we can save."

One facet of the institute's enrichment programs has received international recognition.

"The Musical Minds program is something I've worked with for eight years," says Adina Portowicz, who's not only David's wife, but with her PhD in musicology, the creator of the program.

"The idea is to introduce children to the exciting world of music, allowing them to express themselves not just by art and movement, but by taking music lessons themselves. Children who learn to play a musical instrument develop additional listening, learning and language skills as well as musical proficiency. It's just one more chance to help them succeed."

Musical Minds now extends beyond the reach of the Jaffa Institute and, as part of the international Yehudi Menuhin Foundation, also trains outside teachers in its philosophy. Success is measured one kid at a time.

"We had one little boy who was doing very poorly in school, but was amazingly good in playing the trumpet. One day, he asked if he could take his trumpet to school so he could perform for his classmates. It took a ton of paperwork to make that happen, to make sure he'd bring it back intact, but we managed it.

"He played for his class and was a huge hit – it was the beginning of a new world for him. His classmates saw him in a new light, his teacher praised him, and for once, he was being singled out for his achievement.

"He was so cute when he brought the trumpet back. 'I'm just a winner when it comes to music!' he said, grinning from ear to ear. Now he saw himself as a winner, not a loser, and it all started when he learned to play the trumpet."

Unfortunately, salvaging some children's lives requires much more than lunch, music lessons or homework supervision. These are children whose parents have proved to be so abusive, dangerous or neglectful that the children have been removed from

their homes by court order. For them, the Jaffa Institute maintains several residential facilities: Neveh Ofer, run by a married couple with three children of their own, offers a respite for up to 14 children in emergency situations, until long-term solutions are identified; Beit Shemesh Residential Facility, where 340 boys live and enjoy the benefits of a quality Jewish education; and Beit Ruth, a hostel for girls aged 14 to 18.

Ronit Lev-Ari, project director for Beit Ruth, comes uniquely qualified. After earning her master's in criminology – focusing on the plight of battered women, the first empirical research done on the subject in Israel – Lev-Ari created the country's first crisis hot line for women.

Today she spends her days helping reconstruct the lives of the 12 girls currently in residence at Beit Ruth, encouraging them not just in recovery from the abuse they've suffered, but to move ahead, becoming educated, resourceful and productive members of society.

LOOKING AT the trim, graceful home in the heart of Rishon Lezion, nothing at all suggests it's a group home or a residential facility. The four-story house sits in the middle of a lovely family neighborhood and comes complete with an inviting backyard with over-loaded fruit trees.

Four big bedrooms welcome three girls each, and all over the common areas, books, games and semi-completed art or craft projects hint at the girls' interests. All the color-coordinated sofas and chairs look comfy, and a tantalizing aroma drifts from the kitchen signaling that lunch is nearly ready.

For these girls, Beit Ruth is nothing short of a haven. For most, it's the first time they've ever felt safe, protected and loved.

"All the girls here were sexually abused at some point in their lives," Lev-Ari says. "I can't begin to describe what some of them have been through. The point of creating a lovely home for them is to show them that they're important; if we put them in an institution-like place, it would only confirm their original idea: that they're worthless, not worth caring about. Here, because we have only 12 girls at a time, we can give each the individual attention she needs,

whatever it is. And since they're all close to the same age, it's like living with a dozen sisters."

One difference between Beit Ruth and regular family homes is that these girls are all home-schooled.

"We were asked by the welfare office to do that, and at this point in their lives, it's best," Lev-Ari says. "They've already been out in the world and were battered and bruised in the process.

"What they need right now is to feel safe – physically safe, but also free from taunts, teasing or emotional trauma they might encounter in a regular school. They're not cloistered; this isn't a locked facility. They go out when they wish, neighbors invite them over for Shabbat, and most work or volunteer somewhere one or two days a week. But every day, two teachers and several student teachers arrive to give classes, regular schoolwork plus art, musical evenings, the whole range of cultural education.

They'll all take their *bagrut* [matriculation certificate]. After that, they go on to the army or National Service. But still, on holidays and Shabbat, this will be their home."

As one might expect, there's a waiting list for Beit Ruth.

"Our admittance process is unique," Lev-Ari notes. "We can't accept every girl – some are violent or addicted to drugs. We look for girls we can help – they're all victims, no question about that. But we look for those girls who are destroying only themselves, not other people.

"For everyone's safety, we can't tolerate any girl who hurts others. The decision to accept a girl is made before we ever see her, solely from her profile and record. We don't consider her ethnicity, the way she looks, or her mannerisms.

"When she first comes to interview, she knows she's already been accepted. Then it's up to her: Does she want to come, live by our rules, do what she has to do to become a part of this family? It's her decision."

Staff member Iris Twersky makes it clear:

"Some girls this age have already been out on the streets, working as prostitutes. Some can be reclaimed, their lives salvaged. But others – and there's plenty of those, too – have enjoyed all the excitement of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. What we're offering doesn't sound all that attractive to them.

"We do know this: We help a dozen girls here at a time, but that's just a tiny fraction of the number who need, and desperately want, this kind of help. We never have fewer than 50 girls on our waiting list."

"Working with sexually abused girls is different than working with abused boys," Lev-Ari notes. "When boys are abused, they act out. They get noisy, they get into trouble, they show the world they're miserable. With girls, it's the opposite. They withdraw into themselves. They become very quiet, almost like they don't want to be seen. Many are identified by social workers when they stop going to school. If you can reach the girl early enough, you can make a difference.

"A lot of attention is being paid right now to preventing prostitution – and, indeed, most prostitutes were sexually harassed at an early age. But not every girl who's been sexually harassed turns into a prostitute.

"What makes the difference? How the girl is treated after she was hurt. If somebody came to her, helped her, took care of her, loved her, she'll be OK. That's what we do here."

The list of Beit Ruth's success stories seems almost as long as its waiting list. Girls have gone on to university, to satisfying careers, to becoming the kind of mothers they themselves never had. At least three were accepted by the army after having previously been rejected because of drug or criminal offenses – and one of those became an officer. All are living lives they would never have dared dream of just a few years ago.

One success story is playing out right now.

"One girl who came here three years ago had suffered some very negative experiences with the police," Twersky recounts. "She'd frequently run away from

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– Ronit Lev-Ari



home, and the police would bring her back, very much against her will. As a result, she had a record.

"When she came to Beit Ruth, she was very fragile and didn't trust anyone – not an easy person. But gradually she began to grow. We realized how smart she was, and how strong she was becoming, a totally different person than when she arrived.

"Then one day, she announced that her dream was to volunteer with the police! We were astonished, but that's what she wanted.

"The first time she applied, she was rejected because of her record. They told her she'd have to maintain a clean record for one year, then she could apply again. She did, and she was accepted. Now she's achieved the first of her dreams, and I have no doubt many more will follow."

"It's even better than that," Lev-Ari notes. "I went with her to the police station. Even though she's only 17 and physically quite small, she was made head of the volunteer group. She's really turned her life around."

MANY OF the Jaffa Institute programs run behind the scenes, much less visible than activity centers or hostels. One of them is the Food Distribution Center that operates out of a warehouse in a quasi-industrial area of Jaffa.

"It's one more extension of the institute's original goal – to help the kids," says Katriel Kalmanovitch, an eight-year employee of the Jaffa Institute who occasionally delivers food boxes. "The hot lunch at school and sandwiches help the kids in school, but very frequently the whole family needs help."

Delivering the boxes – some 350 every third week, and 1,000 during holiday season – was always a highlight of his day, Kalmanovitch recalls.

"Sometimes I'd come, tap on the door. They'd open it quickly and take the box inside as fast as possible so the neighbors wouldn't see. But most of the time I'd telephone just prior to arriving, to make sure someone was home, and a kid would happily shout out: 'Mama! The food is coming!' and then run to open the door.

"Those boxes of food are critically important. Most of the families are working, sometimes three generations are working, but then something happens, they miss a paycheck or two, and then they're in crisis."

Shalom Portowicz, son of David and Adina, has been development director of the Food Distribution Center in addition to running the Institute's Welfare to Well-Being Program, which trains long-term unemployed Jaffa women in marketable job skills. The daily operation is run by Gil Sabo, mostly by himself, together with a host of volunteers.

"Everything is donated," he says, waving his hand at the ceiling-high stacks of food cartons. "We've now managed to computerize everything and arrange it by expiration date. A tickler tells us when something comes within three months of expiring.

"We pack a dozen different commodities in each

family box, 16 to 20 kilos of food," he says. "Rice, syrup, flour, oil, sugar, vegetables, soup powder, cereal, pasta, tehina. It's designed to feed a family for about two and a half weeks. For Holocaust survivors, we also add frozen chickens, fish and milk. We deliver about 200 of those."

The warehouse operation sounds like a mini-United Nations.

"We just had a Muslim group from Turkey here to help, people from Ukraine came to pack boxes, from the US, Australia, Mexico, all over. Local school groups and people doing National Service, too. It's a nice way for a tour group to work for a few hours and know they did something to help someone else."

Where does all the money come from to pay for all this?

Chesky Portowicz, another Portowicz son and director of Israeli Operations, says there's been a transition in donors.

"Before the economic meltdown in the US, most of our donations came from abroad," he says. "Now, about 40 percent comes from Israel. Some people are surprised by that, but we've got a great board of directors who know who to ask. Our list of Partners – Israeli donors, who each donate NIS 25,000 a year – is both long and growing. But of course every day we're forced to consider how much more we could do if we had just a little bit more money."

The Jaffa Institute is a family operation in more ways than one. Interestingly enough, many of the lives that get turned around through all the institute's organizations are welcomed back into the fold.

"Like I said, back when we started, I never saw a book bag in Jaffa," comments founder David Portowicz. "Now we have a waiting list for scholarships – kids from Jaffa going on for higher education. Some of them come back and work for us.

"We employ about 200 people – computer experts, teachers, counselors and social workers. Of that 200, 80 of them – 40 percent – grew up in our programs and became successes. The truth is, they're the best role models we have.

"It's not me – they see me, they hear my accent, know I'm a doctor and say, 'But that's you. That's not me!' But when they see other professionals who were indeed just like them, just as poor, hungry or abused, that really sends a message.

"Twenty years ago, we did a little survey, asked kids what they wanted to be when they grew up. We heard 'plumber,' 'porter,' 'janitor,' 'factory worker.' What do we hear now? 'Doctor,' 'lawyer,' 'scientist,' 'engineer,' 'software designer.' They've gotten the message: They can succeed just like anyone else in whatever they want.

One girl, she was just 12 at the time, put it best: "Thank you for giving me a future," she said.

"That's the goal – creating futures, one kid at a time."

For more information, www.jaffainstitute.org or call (03) 683-2626.