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Faces of terror attacks Local network embraces Israel's survivors

by Paula Amann News Editor

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Yehuda Maryan's eyes were damaged -- just moments after the 13-year-old Jerusalem boy offered his seat at a bus stop to an elderly woman. She was killed in the April 12 Mahane Yehuda suicide bombing that left Maryan injured.

Agbaria Kibach, 20, lost much of the skin on her legs and shattered several bones in an Afula suicide bus bombing. She awaits skin grafts at Hadera's Hillel-Yaffe Hospital.

Many American Jews have been shocked by the deaths of Israelis murdered in a continuing chain of attacks by Palestinian terrorists. But the survivors of these incidents also have names, faces, stories and a need for connection with others, say organizers of Operation Embrace, a locally based support network for victims of terror.

"We in America are made aware that people are being killed, but the wounded are somewhat anonymous," said Potomac's Jocelyn Krifcher, who returned last weekend from visiting close to 50 of the injured in Israel, Maryan and Kibach among them.

Krifcher traveled with Aviva Tessler and Gail Nadel, teachers at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School and the Melvyn J. Berman Hebrew Academy, respectively.

Operation Embrace took root last spring in response to the unrelenting violence of the current Palestinian Intifada. Tessler, Krifcher, Anne Clemons and Avivah Litan, all of Potomac, launched the group last summer over a kitchen table, Clemons said.

As members of the mission walked the wards of three Israeli hospitals, one rehabilitation center and several homes last week, bringing gifts, letters and a human presence to the wounded, the trio, in Nadel's words, "demonstrated on a one-to-one basis that we are with them and have not forgotten them or their plight."

The women brought letters to terror survivors from scores of young well-wishers at such Washington-area schools as the Hebrew Academy and CES/JDS.

Thanks to Operation Embrace donors, the Americans also were able to distribute more than 20 laptop computers to those destined for long-haul recoveries and in many cases, functional loss of limbs.

Tessler recalls watching Maryan, surrounded by his curious brothers and sisters, sit up in bed to lay hands on his new computer.

Operation Embrace made sure Yehuda's siblings also got presents, since the injuries of one child often mean less attention from parents for others in the family.

"It's very hard to comprehend how many lives have been shattered by a single incident," Krifcher said, adding, "The bridge that we're building is going beyond the individual to embrace the whole family and their whole new reality."

The effort, Tessler stressed, includes outreach to young and old, Jew and Arab.

At Hadassah Hospital on Mt. Scopus, she spoke briefly with a 75-year-old woman who had survived the Nazi extermination camp of Auschwitz only to become a casualty of the bombing of a seder in Netanya a month ago. She was left paralyzed from the waist down.

The group also met with Kibach, a young Arab woman who happened to be boarding a bus in Afula as a suicide bomber blew it up on March 20.

The Nazareth University student hopes to continue her studies, made easier by the gift of a laptop from Operation Embrace.

Kibach's father, who hails from the village of Umm-el Fachm, known as a hotbed of radicalism, gave the three American Jews his blessing for helping his daughter, Krifcher said.

The activists also contacted two former area residents whose lives have been touched by terrorism. Tessler met with Sherri Mandell, who, with her husband, Seth, and children, moved from Silver Spring to the West Bank town of Tekoa in 1996. In a cave nearby, just over a year ago, her 13-year-old son Koby was brutally murdered, along with another youth.

Operation Embrace will be using its funds to send five Israeli children to Camp Koby, a summer camp established in Koby Mandell's memory to offer a supportive setting to the siblings of youngsters killed in terrorist attacks.

Tessler also visited former Rockville resident Gila Weiss at home in Jerusalem as she prepares for surgery to correct injuries to her eyes sustained in the Mahane Yehuda market bombing in April. Weiss' spirits remain high, Tessler reports.

"It's important we get involved with people in Israel," Tessler said. "So many of our discussions are about borders and policy and who's going to be the next prime minister, but I think some of the holiest sites we have in Israel are the people."

Tessler and Krifcher will report on their mission at a reception at Congregation Beth Sholom and Talmud Torah on May 21.

As a next step, their group hopes to match the terror victims they just befriended with local families who will maintain the contacts.

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