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Operation Embrace aids terror victims

by Paula Amann News Editor

On a visit to a Tel Aviv hospital, Potomac resident Aviva Tessler found a new cause.

She and a friend were making calls to the rehabilitation wards of Tel HaShomer with mishloach manot, boxes of food and candy, on Purim last spring. The recipients were Israeli victims of terrorism.

They included a Druze soldier paralyzed from the waist down by a Gaza bomb and a 24-year-old woman who had lost both legs in a Hadera car bombing.

Tessler, who was spending a sabbatical in Israel with her husband, Rabbi Joel Tessler of Beth Sholom Congregation and Talmud Torah in Potomac, and their two daughters, expected the severely wounded patients to keep strangers bearing gifts at arm's length. Not so.

"What we heard was 'one day, we're headlines and the next day, we're forgotten,' " recalled Tessler, a teacher at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School. "And we saw by their actions how much this little visit meant."

She kept in touch with several of the people and found there was more she could do to help. Raising funds among her friends, she purchased a laptop for Michal, the young amputee, so she could stay in touch with the world outside her ward.

The little visit grew into a campaign, Operation Embrace, which saw its official launch at an event last Thursday at Beth Sholom.

"Right now, we want to show Israelis that the American Jewish community has not forgotten them and that we stand united in the ongoing struggle to keep our homeland safe," said Anne Clemons, who along with Potomac neighbors Avivah Litan and Jocelyn Krifcher, is co-chairing the effort.

Operation Embrace, which has already begun outreach to area synagogues, has a five-point program. Each congregation or other interested group chooses an Israeli family that has fallen victim to terror, pledges to stay in touch regularly, incorporates the family into synagogue programming, seeks to determine and fill the family's needs as possible and tries to support Israel through the relationship with the chosen family.

Tessler has sent a letter about the program to 10 local synagogues, across the denominations.

"The bottom line is that there's an absence of American Jews there now," said Clemons. "Sept. 11 has changed our lives forever and it's also connected us to Israel on a level we did not connect before."

Speakers at the Nov. 8 kick-off included Monique Goldwasser, a 20-year-old former dancer and terrorism survivor, and her mother, Sharon Gerson, along with Aviva Raz-Schechter, counselor for public affairs at the Embassy of Israel.

Tessler hopes Operation Embrace will take hold across denominational lines in a time of risk and uncertainty.

"I thought it would be helpful for both Israeli victims of terror and the American Jewish community to embrace one another, because terror seems so faceless," Tessler said. "Connecting puts a face on this faceless terror."

Meanwhile, she continues to be inspired by the resilience of those Israelis who have often weathered the loss of friends and family along with their injuries.

Her new friend, Michal, says Tessler, ends each conversation on an upbeat note: "Yehiyeh tov (It will be OK)."

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