

Anne Clemmons, left, and Jocelyn Krifcher talk about Operation Embrace, a group that aids those injured in Mideast violence. In the foreground are photos of people the women met on trips to Israel.



PHOTOS BY MARIE POIRIER MARZI FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Group Aids Survivors of Violence

Women Try to Improve Lives Of Those Wounded in Mideast

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One girl lost her legs and her best friend in a suicide bombing as she was eating pizza at a restaurant in Israel. A boy was nearly blinded after an explosion at a busy bus stop. He had just offered his seat on bench to an elderly woman, who died in the attack. A blast at an Israeli disco shattered the face of a 15-year-old aspiring model. A father of eight who tried to help victims of a bombing was attacked and will never walk again.

Jocelyn Krifcher knows their stories, and dozens more, by heart. They are some of the 4,300 Israelis who have been severely injured as violence in the Middle East has intensified over the past two years.

"When you read about the attacks in the paper, you read about the number of people killed," said Krifcher, 41, of Potomac. "But the people who are left alive are so battered and beaten and their lives messed up in every way. Months and months go by, and they're still in the hospital and not really on the radar screen of anybody."

So last November, Krifcher and three other Montgomery County women began a project called Operation Embrace to help improve the lives of those injured in Middle East violence. So far, they have delivered hundreds of cards and letters from area schoolchildren, along with dozens of laptop computers, video games and DVDs.

"We are letting them know that American Jews care about and support them," said Anne Clemmons (on right), 43, of Rockville, one of the organizers. "We wanted to take all these injured and put names on anonymous faces and help people connect with them."

The project began when Aviva Tessler, another of the group's founders, spent six months on sabbatical in Israel last year with her two children and husband, who is a rabbi at Beth Shalom synagogue in Potomac. Horrified by the escalating number of casualties, Tessler felt compelled to visit with some of the families of the dead, then ventured into hospitals to visit the wounded.



"One girl told me, 'I lost my legs. So when you run, please run a little faster for me; when you play, play a little harder for me.' It was such a sad, piercing reflection that I knew I had to do something more," recalled Tessler, 41, of Potomac.

When she returned, Tessler began work on Operation Embrace. The group sponsored trips to Israel in May and July to bring gifts and encouragement to the injured. Another trip is planned for October or November.

Operation Embrace matches families, synagogues, businesses and schools with victims and their families. Most of those involved are in the Washington area, but synagogues in Los Angeles are also helping. Some call and write with support. Others make visits to Israel.

The group hopes to be able to purchase additional laptops for the injured. In addition, the group has helped children from Israel attend a camp in New York and one in Israel, called Camp Kobie after a 14-year-old boy, originally from Silver Spring, who was stoned to death.

Tessler estimates that Operation Embrace has connected with several hundred victims so far, not all of them Jews.

The laptops and DVD players are particularly useful since the victims are often bedridden, Tessler said. One of the injured was able to finish a college degree using the computer, while others can communicate with friends and family by e-mail.

"For me, it's very cathartic, almost a selfish activity to be doing this, because you feel a lot of guilt and angst over living here as a Jewish American just because of circumstance," said Avivah Litan, 47, of Potomac. "Their lives are in danger every minute of every day."

Seven generations of Litan's extended family have lived in Palestine and Israel.

Three of the founders have been to Israel with the group. Clemons plans a trip this fall.

"I feel that as Jews we have a responsibility to visit our homeland in good times and bad," said Krifcher, who has four children ages 3 to 10 who are concerned for their mother's safety. "Yes, I'm scared, and my kids are scared. I called them like 17 times a day."

Krifcher, who grew up in South Africa and lived in Israel for seven years, said each visit takes planning. She will eat only at guarded restaurants without long lines, reasoning that terrorists are less likely to strike where there are no crowds.

She and the other women hope for peace, but they are not counting on it any time soon.

"[Former Israeli prime minister] Golda Meir once said, 'There will be peace when the Arabs love their children more than they hate us,' " Krifcher said. "That's how I feel as a mother and as a citizen of the world."

For more information about Operation Embrace, call 301-983-8867.