

## Israel is Threatened

Don't Let Her Enemies Win. Join Us Today & Get a Free Israel Calendar.  
[www.IFCJ.org](http://www.IFCJ.org)



Photo by: Ben Hartman

## Social Affairs: Guardian angels

By BEN HARTMAN  
05/11/2010

'The Jerusalem Post' spends a night with ELEM's volunteer crew, seeking out at-risk youth. A snapshot of some of today's more troubled kids.

It's midnight in a high-crime city in the center of the country, and ELEM's weekly "commando night" is about to begin. The charity's volunteers head out in a big body panel van looking in parks and building courtyards for at-risk kids in need of some guidance or just a ready ear from someone a few years older.

The vans are operated by ELEM – Youth in Distress in Israel, a nonprofit that helps at-risk kids and is mainly funded by the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, called the Keren Leyedidut in Israel.

The van program is one of ELEM's outreach programs meant to establish contact with kids in the parks and back streets where they gather at night. The organization operates 15 vans in 18 cities from Eilat to the far north, where a single van crisscrosses the towns of the Upper Galilee and the Golan.

In most cities, the volunteers set out twice a week and park in an area where kids congregate at night.

The van, which they say serves as a sort of safe area, includes a table and chairs, warm drinks and snacks, backgammon boards and card games, as well as pamphlets on safe sex, drug abuse and ways to avoid violence.

On "commando night," however, volunteers drive around actively searching for kids who may be in trouble and need someone to talk to.

Volunteers said they always keep water and juice on hand to help sober up kids who have drunk too much and are dehydrated, while the snacks and cup o' pasta meals are kept in stock for kids in worse shape, who may not be able to count on a warm meal at home. As opposed to the vans operating in suburban areas, having warm food on hand is more important for the Tel Aviv night van, which often deals with youngsters who have run away from home and are living on the streets in the big city.

For these kids, many of who are using heroin or working in the sex trade, ELEM volunteers try to counsel them on avoiding drug use or promiscuous sex. However, when all else fails, and they realize that they can't prevent the kids from harming themselves, they hand out condoms or clean needles, so at least the kids can avoid contracting HIV or other diseases.

"We try to guide them, we aren't here to preach to them," said Shlomo, a volunteer with the night van. "We don't come with the approach of nagging them, or asking them why are you shooting up? Why are you sleeping around? Our approach is to tell them if you're going to be shooting up, at least use a clean needle so you can protect yourself. And if you're going to have sex, make sure to use a condom."

While teen runaways and hard drug addiction are more common for the Tel Aviv van, in the other towns volunteers deal mainly with neighborhood kids drinking and smoking in parks into the late hours of the night.

"In a lot of these older cities, people aren't allowed to expand their homes bigger than three rooms, so once the house is full, the kids feel cramped and have nowhere to go, so they head out to the parks to be with their friends," said Shirit, who has volunteered with the night van for the past two years.

ACCORDING TO ELEM, the most common problems it deals with are drinking and smoking, but also gambling, which over the past year has become rampant in parks and bomb shelters. Volunteers said they feel that their presence can be a calming factor, and that they can reach out to kids who most people tend to avoid. In addition, at times they have served as character witnesses in trials of young people they have worked with, and have also helped them acquire legal representation.

Volunteers for the night van program are all older than 24 and come from a variety of backgrounds, with most of them from middle-class families untouched by many of the difficulties suffered by the kids they are trying to help.

"There is a big difference between empathy and identification. It's like how you don't have to be a disabled person to help the disabled. No matter who you are or where you come from, if you can connect to them, it's all that matters," said Shlomo.

While they feel that their presence can help prevent crime, volunteers said that they often have a less than warm relationship with the local police.

"Our relations with the police aren't always friendly, because we don't report kids to the police for doing drugs. We'll go to the police if we know that a kid is going to commit a serious crime, or we will go to the police immediately if we know about someone having a firearm," Shirit said.

She added that increasing cooperation with the police is problematic since their work is completely dependent on earning the trust of kids, who won't speak with them if they think they are working with the police. At the same time, Shirit said that the group doesn't feel that it is by any means a substitute for the police or social workers.

"We don't try to replace the schools or the police; we just try to go where there is a vacuum. Counselors and schools wait for the kids to come to them, and police usually come when a crime has been committed.

We go out and try to prevent problems by finding the kids and speaking and listening to them where they are."

The commando night method works in a rather straightforward manner. The van drives around in problem areas the volunteers are familiar with, and looks for groups of youngsters loitering. Two volunteers will get out of the van and walk up to the young people, asking, "Can we bother you for a minute?" before sitting down for a talk.

While the prospect of approaching groups of intoxicated young men in public parks in some of the country's roughest cities may sound harrowing, according to volunteers, the response is almost always positive.

"I've been doing this for two years, and I've never been harassed or cursed out. I can really only think of two occasions where someone has told me to leave him alone," Shirit said.

That said, the group does have some rules, for instance, if youngsters are too drunk or seem too unruly, they won't approach them to safeguard themselves.

They also won't get involved in personally breaking up physical altercations. Also, they don't allow smoking or drinking in the van, and ask youngsters that if they have a knife, to hand it over before coming to talk to them. Shirit added that ELEM's rules for operating and for reporting crimes to the police are exactly the same as state social workers.

At 1 a.m. on a Tuesday night in mid-October, two volunteers, Yael and Dani, approach a group of young men

on a park bench in a neglected corner of a working- class Tel Aviv suburb. The young men outnumber the volunteers about five to one, have glazed-over eyes from smoking hashish, and a few seemed to have drunk alcohol.. The youngsters were from the suburb's poor community of Caucasian immigrants, and spoke in street Hebrew peppered with Russian and Arabic curses.

The volunteers introduce themselves and start speaking to the youngsters, who begin to test them, asking if they're undercover cops and offering some low-grade teasing. Dani gets the conversation going by asking how many of them are in the army, and only two raise their hands, with one of them saying, "We have our own army here."

While the rest of the group goofs off on the park benches, a skinny 20-year-old with a scorpion tattoo on his left hand inked in prison takes Dani aside and asks him if there's anything he can do to help him get into the army. The young man said he'd spent several years in prison for attempted murder, and now that he's out would like to start a new life and make the army his first step. Dani speaks to the young man for several minutes and offers some advice. Minutes later, the volunteers bid farewell and make their way back to the van.

"Look, there's no way the army will take someone like him, someone who was in prison for a serious charge. Still, you can see that they want help, and that even with tough kids, when someone comes to them, talks to them, they respond to it, they aren't used to it," Dani says.

---