

ROAD TO SUCCESS

ELEM (Youth in Distress) helps kids get back on track

By ERIKA PRAFDER

NEVER underestimate the value of an outstretched hand or a positive role model.

For 16-year-old Alon, such assistance helped him go from mouthing off in school to speaking before Israeli President Shimon Peres.

Originally from Kiryat Gat, a city 35 miles south of Tel Aviv, Alon went through a challenging, rebellious stage of his life, and was in danger of spiraling out of control. Luckily, a friend referred him to Hafuch al Hafuch — an organization of 13 national counseling centers spread throughout Israel that are operated by ELEM (Youth in Distress). The 30-year-old organization advocates for juveniles at risk.

"When I first came, I was closed and introverted. It was hard to open up to other people," Alon says via a translator. "But by getting to know others there, and others getting to know me, I built up my self-esteem," he continues.

At the time, "I was getting into a lot of arguments with teachers at school. I was not able to control myself and would answer them back. Through the help of Hafuch, I learned self-control. I learned how to count to 10 rather than just lashing out," he says.

While ELEM operates in Israel, its board is located in New York City. "We work with a professional committee of educators and psychologists to [develop] innovative ways to work with teens at risk in Israel," says ELEM/America executive director Michele Carlin.

ELEM extends its services to kids ages 12 to 20 who are still in school but at risk of dropping out, as well as to teens who are drug-addicted and involved in prostitution, according to Carlin. "There are the same problems in Israel as there are here — many single-parent households, domestic and sexual violence," says Carlin. "But in addition, in Israel, there is a tremendous influx



There are a dozen Hafuch al Hafuch centers currently operating throughout Israel, with professional staff and over 400 volunteers.

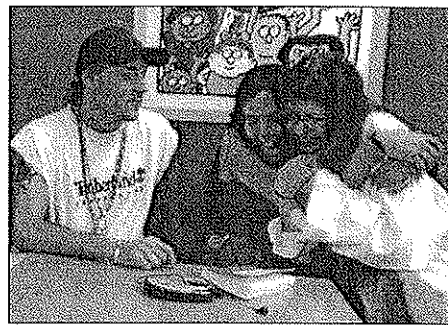
of immigrants who have difficulty assimilating and end up on the street. And then there are those living with post-traumatic stress due to the security situation there — kids who are living in border towns with missiles coming over," explains Carlin. "We also work with Arabs, a minority in Israel [about 20 percent of the population there], who don't feel they have the same advantages," she adds.

One of the ways in which ELEM reaches troubled youth is through its outreach vans. "Our vans operate in 18 cities, traveling out at night to bring humanitarian aid to kids living on the street. We bring food, water and clothes, and set up chairs outside our vans and talk to them," says Carlin. "If they need a place to stay, we refer them to other services in the community."

Approximately 50,000 contacts with such young people are made annually, according to the organization's executive director.

Mentoring and vocational training programs are offered as well. "Many of these kids don't have positive influences in their lives," says Carlin. "We match them with positive role models and give them the tools to become productive citizens."

Through a vocational restaurant program, for example, "Kids who have dropped out of an educational framework are taught



Social workers reach out to teens at a counseling center. They are open five days a week in the afternoon and evening.

to be chefs and pastry chefs," says Carlin. "We teach them how to get up in the morning to be at work on time and what to wear to work. Many of these kids don't have anyone in their lives to set such examples for them," she adds.

To become one of ELEM's 2,000 volunteers (they're the largest volunteer group in Israel), you must be an adult over the age of 22, and be willing to commit to the organization for at least one year.

At its counseling centers, which are staffed by social workers, "We offer workshops on sexual identity, getting a job, contraception, and other issues teens are interested in," says Carlin.

Thanks to ELEM, Alon, now more confident and aware of his strengths and abilities, plans to become a flying technician in the Israeli Air Force, he says.

"One of the greatest highlights in my life was being chosen to meet with Shimon Peres to represent ELEM," says Alon.

He and a few other youth being helped by ELEM were asked to meet with the renowned political leader to discuss how the organization had influenced their lives.

"I never could have dreamed this could happen. Today, I have a much better sense of who I am and what I'm capable of doing. I'm confident I'll be able to continue and accomplish my plans for an army career."