

Sexual Violence Victims are Shedding their Masks at 'A Real Home'

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By Wayler Polack

Since its establishment five years ago, "A Real Home" allows sexual harassment victims to take a break from their daily struggles and to confront their past.

One of the program's participants said, "I hope that I will be able to incorporate what this place has given me in my everyday life".

She continued, "Since I was a premature baby, I was never supposed to survive. According to the statistics, my future is bleak. I will get divorced because my parents did. My relationships are prone to be complicated because I grew up without a father. My children, like me, will probably experience sexual assault. But it's only here, at 'A Real Home,' that they would consider me a statistical deviation".

For the purpose of privacy, we'll call her "Shira". Shira resides in a two-story house, north of Tel-Aviv. The living room is full of warmth. It has a bookcase and a big window facing a yard full of greenery and a swing. Breaking the tranquil atmosphere that otherwise characterizes the place, sexual assault is only the topic discussed in that yard, which is filled with cigarette smoke.

Unfortunately, sexual assault and incest exists everywhere, along with denial, repression, and accusations - everywhere but at "A Real Home".

According to "ELEM", a non-profit organization for youth in distress in

Israel, every seventh woman in Israel is exposed to incest and every third woman will be sexually abused. "A Real Home" is a home for sexually abused young women, ages 17-26, established in 2006 by ELEM. In addition to being an actual home, it allows these women to put aside their daily struggles and to learn to cope with their situations.

The Home acts as a supportive therapeutic community to which the girls come for a few hours a week. Treatment there goes beyond personal therapy. Zohar Bersky, house manager, commented, "We have women joining us after years of being in personal therapy, without bringing up the subject even once. It's absurd, the fact that this subject is hushed not only by the community but by therapeutic professionals as well."

Along with therapeutic activities such as photography and art workshops, the girls prepare dinner together. You'll usually see a few of them sitting outside for a smoke.

"A few days ago I was at the movies watching a film about a rape and the audience's reaction really angered me", complained Orit, who has been coming to the house for the last year and a half.

"People think rape happens only in dark alleys, by suspicious men, and that women are always at fault. This is not true. People also don't understand behavior like self-harm. They see it as mental illness. This is what leads a woman to keep these things secret and to feel completely alone. "A Real Home" lets them gather, talk about it, come to terms with what happened and understand that there is nothing to be ashamed of. During the process I went through, I have learned to speak about it and only then could I reduce my self-harm behavior."

"Even in cases where there is a supportive family, it is a difficult situation", says Gali, who once attempted suicide. I have often been asked, 'Doesn't this

place make you feel worse? Don't you prefer healthy, happy girlfriends?' My answer is: 'this is the only place I can say I have been sexually abused without feeling judged or doubted'.

According to Reli Katzav, director of programs for girls and high risk youth at ELEM, "many girls that come here have spent time in mental health wards and have a history of anorexia, suicide attempts and self-harm. Here we are trying to plant the first seeds of healing. The house gives some visibility to the damage and allows a girl to see who she is and what she is without it. The results are clear".

Rebuilding confidence in other people is an important element in the work of the staff, which includes Bersky and two other social workers. A group of volunteers works alongside them every day. "I never told anyone about my abuse before I came here", says Hilla, who is 21 years old. "I found myself in a desperate situation where the streets were the only environment I could handle. All I did was drink and smoke. I hope that I will be able to incorporate what this place has given me into my everyday life, given that it is impossible to erase my past".

The word "process" produces a giggle among the girls. In this place you go through "processes" and there are "opportunities", they say. However, despite their joking, it is clear that all of them leave this house completely transformed since they first arrived. "When I first came here I was shocked at the way the girls were dressed. I remember thinking 'what are they doing? Who will believe that they were sexually assaulted?' " says Shira, 26, now "graduating" from a Real Home. This thought came back many times, even while I was painting my own nails red. At "A Real Home" I have learned to deal with things like this".

Amit, 22, hid her abuse for years, but at some point the act had to end. "I kept up appearances during 12 years of treatment," she says. "Since first grade I

knew that the goal was to 'succeed' and I acted accordingly. I saw other girls and I knew that our starting point was similar, but that I had been abused and this made me inferior. For a long time I wore baggy clothes to hide my body. I was anorexic but I kept on with the show. When I finished high school, I realized that I couldn't continue this act. The audience had gone home. I was left to cope with my bare self and so I came here."

One of the questions that plague the girls is why someone with no background of assault would choose to work or volunteer with them. "It's a question I have been asked more than once, and I have yet to find an answer that satisfies the girls", says Sarah Sher, an educator who has been volunteering at "A Real Home" for two years. "I came here by chance and fell in love. For the girls, because of their background, it is very difficult to understand how people can give without wanting anything in return".

ELEM's President, Nava Barak, admits that the changes the girls are going through also affect her.

"After five years, I feel that this project touches me and everyone who takes a part in it. It touches you when you see the girls overcome a lack of confidence, get stronger, become optimistic and even make future plans".

Since the establishment of the home, ELEM has been financing its operations. However, given the limited capacity and desire to expand, additional funding is needed. The board has been working with the Welfare Ministry to begin an expansion of this project and others.

This year, ELEM's "Lights of Hope" flag was placed on Jerusalem's Old City Wall. The Flag project, which has taken place for the last eight years, is designed to raise awareness among the general public to youth at risk and to raise funds for the organization's activities with youth.