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# Dog-training program transforms at-risk youth

By GIL HOFFMAN

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Mission participants at the ZAKA Search and Rescue Training and Empowerment Program for At-risk Youth. Courtesy Jewish Federation in the Heart of NJ

THEY SAY YOU can't teach an old dog new tricks, but what can a dog teach a young man who has had a troubled life?

The participants in the Four Corners of Israel mission from the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey got the answer to that question during an Oct. 21 visit to Kiryat Malachi, a development town in Israel's northern Negev.

There they watched a demonstration of the ZAKA Search and Rescue Training and Empowerment Program for At-risk Youth. The federation-funded program provides therapeutic support for local at-risk youth via dog training therapy.

Dog trainer Dudik Mazor created the program 17 years ago to train search-and-rescue dogs for Israel's ZAKA emergency response teams. There are now 10 branches of the program in towns across the country.

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Mazor said the program gives the young participants "a place to grow, to feel necessary, to understand how valued they are. The dog doesn't know if they are rich or poor, black or white. It doesn't judge them. The kids learn discipline, that 'boundaries' is not a bad word, and to value themselves.

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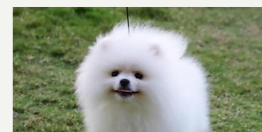
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They may be dogs but they can teach you a lot about yourself."

Mazor said the program has been especially successful with young immigrants from Ethiopia. They are usually hesitant at the start of the training, he said, because they

do not have a tradition of having dogs as pets in their communities. After they have a year of training, said Mazor, he likes seeing how they are transformed.

The program for the youth is only one day per week. Before the mission's arrival in Kiryat Malachi, some of the kids in the program were drinking energy drinks mixed with vodka, a sign that their troubled history was not behind them. Nonetheless, when the time came they presented their dog-training maneuvers with finesse.

The program takes kids — a significant number with drug or alcohol problems — off the streets. Many are inspired enough to end up qualifying for Oketz, the IDF's special canine unit, and some have even attended the course to become a professional dog trainer that Mazor teaches at Ono Academic College in Kiryat Ono.



"I get chills every time I talk about these success stories," Mazor said. "It's a privilege to know I took teenagers and showed them they could do it another way, believing in themselves, not in crime, drugs, or alcohol."

Besides search and rescue, some of Mazor's 50 dogs in Kiryat Malachi are trained to help the physically challenged, to aid veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, or to provide other kinds of therapy.

The visitors from New Jersey were wowed by the program. Michael Danziger of Long Branch said he enjoyed "seeing young people in need being helped in a positive way to give them better lives as adults."

Mazor said he was proud to display his life's work to the mission participants. "The kids on the program are trying to create a framework to give them a light at the end of the tunnel," he said. "I want them to realize that they can dream."

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