



**Orr Shalom Constructive Vacations Program
Encouraged by The Matanel Foundation
2011-2013**

Name of the Program: Orr Shalom Constructive Vacations Program

Year of activity: 2011-2013 (3 years)

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Current State of the Program

Orr Shalom's Constructive Vacations program plays an absolutely essential role in the year-round care of the 200 children in Orr Shalom family group homes. All of these children were removed from their families by social workers due to unimaginable abuse, severe neglect, abandonment and other tragedy. Four times a year, for a total of seven weeks, these therapeutic camps are not only a safe haven, but also an educational and enriching environment during vacation time for the children who do not have a secure family setting to return to during the times when the family group homes close.

The children, 6-18-years-old, attending this program are on the periphery of the periphery of society. While the majority of the children in our care can go home, to extended family or to host families for the vacations of Chanukah, Pesach, August and Sukkot, this program is for children who have nowhere but Orr Shalom to call home.

Besides keeping the children safe and secure with strong routines that integrate into the continuum of their year-round care, this program represents a real "camp" experience.

Thanks to Matanel, the program now provides informal education, day trips, workshops, leadership programs and strong, dedicated counselors for an enriching, challenging and special camp experience. We have also developed and begun implementing a new educational, empowerment and leadership program for the senior campers.



Development Department

Primary Achievements of the Program during Three Years of Encouragement from the Matanel Foundation:

When Orr Shalom first began working with Matanel, we set two primary goals for our Constructive Vacations program.

- To significantly upgrade the educational content of the therapeutic overnight camps.
- To enable every child who needed to attend the camp to do so.

Orr Shalom has successfully achieved these goals.

Significant Upgrade in Programming Content:

Prior to Matanel's encouragement of the program, the camp was a safe and secure place for the children, with a primary emphasis placed on the therapeutic side of the camp, at the expense of educational and enrichment programming.

After three years, we are pleased to report that we have created a camp setting that offers a wide range of programs that are educational, enriching and empowering. The innovations that we have incorporated include:

- **Workshops** in art, dance, music, crafts, cooking, sports, science, and recycled art
- **Cultural activities** that include visits to museums of science and art, a photography workshop, the Tel Hai museum depicting the history of the site in the annals of pre-State Israel, and the Music Festival at Kibbutz Kfar Blum.
- **Healthy outdoors activities** that make full use of the facilities at the children's fingertips: an animal corner and petting zoo, swimming, basketball, biking, football, horse-riding, horse-stabling, and water activities on the Jordan River.
- **Relating to nature** with programs that incorporate survival activities, cooking and sleeping in nature, and understanding and respecting the world as it was given to us.
- **Challenge activities** such as rafting, rappelling, ropes courses and outstanding hikes. These activities, along with the activities in nature, instill the children with a sense of courage, self-confidence, and a belief in themselves as individuals, while also building group unity and teaching the children to trust others.
- **Smaller groups** – The camp is divided into 7 groups of 5-9 children each, based on the age of the campers, enabling us to more effectively focus educational content based on age and stages of emotional development.
- **Increased camper input** with programming has been a crucial addition to the educational content. Many of the children at camp arrive feeling fearful, conflicted and ambivalent. They want to be at home with their families, yet they also want to be where they can feel safe, cared for and loved. When the children take an active role in the camp programming,



Development Department

they get in touch with their own strengths and abilities, they feel like partners within the camp, and they develop their own powers of initiative, activity, thought and follow-through on their ideas. Thus, they more fully experience the power of camp.

- **Connecting with the staff** of knowledgeable, talented, and motivated counselors who have tremendous experience in several fields and disciplines.
- **Added informal Jewish content.** The children under Orr Shalom's care, and particularly those with no place to spend vacations other than our therapeutic camps, have spent their lives feeling alone, abandoned, and with no sense of belonging to any group or community. A significant aspect of what we can (hope to) give them is that very sense of belonging that they so desperately want and need. For children who have spent lifetimes sitting on the periphery of society, the new realization that they are an integral part of the people and land of Israel is invaluable. This Jewish content education is centered on two areas:
 - **Shabbat and Festivals** - Three camp sessions take place during Jewish holidays (Pesach, Sukkot and Channukah) and the fourth one is just weeks before the High Holidays season. We have incorporated programming to include a sense of one-ness with the Jewish people during these times. On Fridays and festival eves, the children have a chance to bake challot in preparation of Shabbat or the holiday, and they share a festive meal together. Every week the children experience Kabbalat Shabbat and Havdala, and learn about the weekly Torah portion. These religious activities are all conducted in an inclusive, non-coercive atmosphere that reflects the religious diversity and mutual respect of the camp staff.
 - **Stimulating educational day trips** – Orr Shalom uses certified tour guides to lead day trips to sites that enable the children to supplement their Jewish and Zionist experience while connecting both with the ancient land and the modern State of Israel, as well as Jewish history and values.

The broad transformation of the camp's educational content has had a tremendous and immediate impact. We have received very positive and encouraging feedback from the children and staff of the camps as well as the staff of the family group homes. At the camp, the sense of innovative freshness in the daily programming enabled the children to have a vacation experience similar to that of normative Israeli children. House parents in the family group homes told us that they saw the difference in what the children were bringing back to the homes from the camp.

Most importantly, as the educational content of the Constructive Vacations program has expanded, so has the interest in attendance by the children themselves.



Development Department

Increased Program Participation:

Three years ago, we accepted a yearly average of 35 children to the Constructive Vacations program, and we were forced to turn away other children, equally deserving and no less needy of the program, due to lack of funds and resources.

Since that time, the profile of children coming to Orr Shalom is much more extreme than it was just a few short years ago, with more of our children needing a safe environment during which to spend their vacations. We have been forced to constantly adjust ourselves to the developing needs of these children, while enabling more children to attend the camps.

In 2013, an average of 45-50 children attended each program session, a total of 70 individual children. Not one child without a place to spend the vacation was turned away. The house parents in the family group homes saw in this expanded format that every child in their year-round care now had a safe, enriching and loving environment to spend their vacations, and that not a single child was forced to return to a place where they would not be properly cared for and loved.

Additional goals achieved in the past three years:

1. Better camp facilities

When Orr Shalom was forced to leave the site at Yemin Orde following the Carmel Forest Fire in December 2010, we knew that upgrading programming content was a guiding factor in our search for a new home. We entered into a strategic partnership with Camp Kimama, one of Israel's finest camp settings. The physical facilities of Kimama allow us to offer many activities that were previously not available. More importantly, these activities now exist in a permanent, stable location that the children and staff can relate to as a permanent "home away from home."

Our partnership with Camp Kimama has given us access to better camp equipment as well. The camp allows Orr Shalom full use of bicycles, sports equipment, a sound system, costumes and accessories for plays and activities.

2. Improved staffing

The strength and the success of camp are determined first and foremost by the strength and effectiveness of its staff.

The Orr Shalom Constructive Vacations program is led by a camp manager and staffed by a team of 12-13 counselors who are trained and supervised by Orr Shalom. The staff also includes four Sherut Leumi volunteers (young women in national service as an alternative to military service) who work in our homes during the year and who attend our camps on a



Development Department

rotating basis. The high staff-child ratio at the camp ensures the care and supervision that these children require.

We have integrated several counselors from Camp Kimama to our staff as activity experts. Many of these counselors live year-round at Kibbutz Amir, where Camp Kimama is located. They are pursuing degrees at nearby Tel Hai College in special education, social work and other disciplines that relate and significantly contribute to their work at the Constructive Vacations camp.

The camp staff represents the epitome of pluralism at its finest. Our counselors are religious, secular, and everything in between, and they come from a wide range of Israeli youth movements. They work together as a team that demonstrates mutual respect for each other and for the differences between them and their religious beliefs.

The unity among the camp staff has been especially visible in the high percentage of counselors who return to camp year after year, as well as in the closeness among the staff members. They often volunteer time above and beyond the requirements of camp by working together between camp sessions for better programming, and for get-togethers that enable them to gel as a team.

3. Improved staff training

Over the past three years we have recognized that as profile of the children attending the camp has become more extreme, our staff has required much more training.

We have incorporated a full-day staff training session before camp. The day includes meetings with senior social workers and full-time Orr Shalom staff on a range of issues, including sexuality, personal boundaries, discipline and adolescence. The training involves a visit to family group homes, where the counselors meet members of the Orr Shalom staff, house parents, and most importantly, some of the children in our care. As a result, the staff gains an intimate understanding about what Orr Shalom is and does, and the significance of their work at the Constructive Vacations program.

4. Closer communication between the camp staff and the year-round staff

Constructive Vacations program counselors receive detailed reports about each child before the camp begins, and in turn send detailed reports about each one to the year-round staff after the camp session is complete.

By staying completely in tune with each child's very unique development, the camp staff can provide consistency for the children when they are at the Constructive Vacation, and



Development Department

the year-round staff is completely aware of any developments, issues, and situations that may arise during the week or two at the camp. Thus a sense of continuity throughout the year is generated for each child attending the camp.

5. Senior Campers Empowerment and Leadership Program

Orr Shalom seeks to enable the children, particularly the older ones, to develop valuable leadership skills. Therefore, we initiated the Senior Campers Empowerment and Leadership Program, in which the older children (ages 15-18) take responsibility for several programs.

These 20-25 children are divided into three teams that deal with logistics, leadership and special projects under the guidance of the camp's counselors.

As the older teens acquire and develop valuable leadership, teamwork and organizational skills, they serve as role models for the younger children. The experience builds the teenagers' self-confidence, which has been damaged from years of abuse and neglect, and provides them with some of the tools necessary for their continued rehabilitation, and for life after Orr Shalom.

6. Overall educational approach

Orr Shalom has never lost sight of the fact that the children in our care, particularly at the Constructive Vacations program, face a desperate reality. Nevertheless, we now relate to the campers more as partners and less as "children in crisis." We recognize that the camp still is, and will remain an emergency safe haven for these children, but we have striven to also allow it to be an overnight camp – with all of the connotations of fun, and life-shaping experiences enjoyed by normative children around the world who attend overnight camps. At the same time, we provide our children with the tools they need in order to address and overcome the very special circumstances that shaped their young lives before they came under the care of Orr Shalom.

7. Permanence and continuity

Arguably the most significant aspect of our partnership with Camp Kimama is the sense of "seasonal permanence" that the children now have. Those who return to camp, sleep in the same bunk, even the same bed, every time. Every vacation is spent with the same core group of children, and often with the same counselors.

Equally important is that Orr Shalom has successfully integrated the camp experience for the children with their lives at the group foster homes throughout the year.



Development Department

Many of these counselors have returned to the camp for several sessions and have become among the permanent "fixtures" in the eyes of the children.

This continuity has enabled Orr Shalom to provide the children with the right combination of "vacation", i.e. time away from their daily routine and setting, while still feeling a sense of permanence and family in their lives, which is one of the most crucial needs that children from at-risk homes have.

A Personal Story

"Shoshana" came to the camp over Sukkot convinced that she was sent there as a punishment. She was a recent arrival to a Family Group Home, and in the period before the holiday, she fought the staff tooth-and-nail to avoid going to the camp. Unfortunately, as she had no home or family to spend the holiday, camp was the only safe option for her.

At the beginning of the week, she would not cooperate in any way with the staff. She dressed in a sexually provocative manner, spent her time cursing at everyone and smoking, and refused to participate in any of the programs or activities.

During the week, the staff spent a great deal of time talking to her, and more importantly – listening to her. She came to see that camp was not a punishment, and that she had done nothing wrong.

Slowly, Shoshana began to join the community and participate with the activities. By the end of the week, she was one of the clearly dominant – in the positive sense of the word – children.

At the end of the week, the children enjoyed a "closing bonfire" and Shoshana took an active role in arranging the event and making it special. While the children were all sitting around the fire and reflecting on the week that was coming to an end, she stood up and asked "Is there anyone here who feels that nobody cares for them? Is there anyone here who feels worthless? I can tell you that you are not. People do care for you, and you are not worthless."

Shoshana, like most of the children in our care, still has a long way to go. But over the course of the Sukkot camp, she took the enormous first steps on her journey.

Summary

Over the past three years, Orr Shalom has successfully upgraded the Constructive Vacations program on several levels. The partnership and encouragement of the Matanel Foundation has enabled us to provide a safe, structured, educational and enriching environment for children who



Development Department

have no other framework for vacation time. More importantly, today no child in our care who needs the program is turned away.

We have improved the educational and experiential content of the camps, and are now better equipped to prepare and support the very staff that provides that content.

We now provide the younger children with the opportunity to feel like partners in the camp experience, and the older children with an opportunity to develop their own leadership skills and the ability to demonstrate responsibility and independence.

Most of all, we have taken children who previously had known only neglect, abuse and ostracism and given them a sense of belonging, of love and of acceptance. They are no longer alone, nor will they ever be again.

The generous support from the Matanel Foundation has made all of this possible.

Parameter	Pre-Matanel	After three years of Matanel
Average number of children served per camp	35 – some children were turned away	50 – all children who needed the camp were able to attend
Informal education activities by counselors	1. Adequate content 2. Larger groups	1. More emphasis on creative educational content. 2. Smaller groups to enable personal attention and more age-appropriate content
Day trips out	Fun-based	Fun-based, with added educational, cultural educational content, group-building and trust-building activities, nature-appreciation and values-based activities
Activities at the camp-site	Limited by camp facilities	New camp facilities include sports fields, horse stables, swimming pool, animal corner, and each child has a bicycle. Professional Camp Kimama staff provides instruction in wider range of activities and workshops
Jewish educational content	Less invested	1. Structure and programming around Shabbat and Jewish holidays in pluralistic, non-coercive atmosphere. 2. Field trips connecting the children to Jewish and Israeli history
Camper participation	Less invested	Children explore and expand their own creativity and natural skills to be a part of content programming. They feel more like partners in the sessions.



Development Department

Leadership building among older children	Less invested	“Senior Campers Empowerment and Leadership” program gives older campers responsibilities in the programs, builds self-confidence and enables them to act and be seen as role models for the younger children.
Educational approach	Focus on “children in crisis” and emergency-haven nature of camp	We treat the children more as partners in the camp. Full integration of "overnight camp" experience with camp's safe haven necessity.
Counseling staff	Fully recruited by Orr Shalom for camp periods	Integrated Camp Kimama staff, some of whom live year-round at Kibbutz Amir and study related disciplines at Tel Hai College.
Sherut Leumi staff	No training and not well integrated into staff	Better trained and more integrated into staff with more specific responsibilities
Permanent home	Post Yemin Orde fire uncertainty	Camp Kimama facilities at Kibbutz Amir are Orr Shalom camps' permanent home. The children sleep in the same beds each session and see camp as a “home away from home.”
Professionalizing of staff	Less invested	More extensive training, including meetings with social workers, year-round Orr Shalom staff and visiting family group homes.
Volunteers	None	In summer 2012, two Israeli girls volunteered