



Perach Zahav Matanel foundation

Written testimonial:

5722 - 2022 -Year End Summary– Program Coordinator

Scholarship activities with the elderly in Beit Yisrael's student village in Gilo:

This year the students' completed their required volunteering hours: a weekly 3-hour session with neighborhood seniors.

At first, staff and students were apprehensive about the length of these sessions. Honest initial reactions from volunteers included:

"What do you do with a person for that long?" "What can we talk about?"

"Once, I understand, but every week for three hours? Isn't that excessive?"

"I don't sit alone that long with my own grandmother!"

I remember reading an article when building the annual work plan. The article suggested that since the Covid-19 pandemic it is harder for young people to commit to longer projects and to maintain consistency.

Seeing as I experienced those same issues on a personal level, I was apprehensive when the year began.

I am happy to report that we have been pleasantly surprised with the level of commitment and consistency, and that in hindsight we made the correct decision.

Beyond the meetings with the seniors themselves, we held regular training and peer learning sessions for students throughout the year.

The session length was perfect for confidence-building; the seniors in the room were sizing us up to see if we had the stamina. So we sat down with them, sometimes even being ok to just sit without talking, to just be. Even these "tests" built our connections.

At that point, the volunteers became more relaxed, understanding how simple it was to fill those hours. Everyone understood that as long as they showed up, physically and mentally, the connections would flourish. This realization calmed them and changed the whole experience/ Volunteers simply focused on building connections without worrying about time.

Of course, there were difficult times, where volunteers were just waiting for the session to end. But even this testifies to the natural and true connection in relationships created between people– Sometimes it goes really well and sometimes less well. These relationships go beyond volunteering.

I will share some stories from this project:

One of the students, Yael, matched with an elderly couple who lives with a foreign home-care worker. Sometimes the meeting was with both, while other times Yael met with just one half of the couple. The elderly man is a Second Temple era enthusiast and has amassed a collection of chanukiyot from this period; he so enjoys talking in



detail about his collection, the era, telling his life story and discussing current issues. At the same time, his wife also needs attention and a listening ear, so Yael would divide her attention perfectly and involve her in the conversation or find ways to talk to her too. Occasionally she would also mediate between them and their foreign worker when there were disagreements.

During a program development session Yael brought up their different needs. An interesting conversation developed. Ostensibly, this couple is in an excellent situation: they are still together, and they also have a foreign worker living with them. However, they are both still lonely in the deeper sense of the word. Their connection with Yael satisfies that deeper need, for someone who hasn't been there, hasn't heard their stories or about the collection.

Another student met with an elderly couple from an absorption center, where they had a complicated living situation. The student volunteered well beyond the regular hours. He would shop for them, go to the pharmacy, and even the hospital when the elderly man was hospitalized temporarily. It should be noted that dialogue with this couple was not simple, and it took time to set appropriate boundaries (otherwise their demands could get unreasonable and excessive). Eventually the student reached a balance; he found a way to communicate well and continues to support them.

Another student volunteered with Esther, a sweet-natured French immigrant, a lover of art, music, painting and knitting. They had three-hour weekly sessions (which according to the student could have happily lasted longer, as it was so delightful and interesting to spend time with her). They had many common interests and topics and the relationship between them was beautiful and beneficial for both parties. They even traveled together to the wedding of another student who volunteered with the elderly woman. In addition, they went together to the "Zikaron B'Salon" holocaust memorial event held for the Beit Yisrael student villages in the assisted living facility where they are live.

I, as coordinator, volunteered with Limor, a wheelchair-bound woman, who is otherwise independent and volunteers as a medical staff assistant at the medical clinic in Gilo. We had become friends back when I was a counselor at the Beit Yisrael mechina. It was a lovely opportunity to turn our meetings into regular weekly meetings as part of my scholarship. We meet, laugh, chat, prepare food, go shopping, clean or fix things around the house, and go out to the mall. During the COVID lockdowns, we chatted regularly on Zoom. When Limor broke her leg I drove her to the hospital; when she was released I helped her return home. We have made many beautiful memories together.

My role as coordinator required matching students to seniors. I also coordinated and facilitated the monthly training and sharing sessions for the volunteers. We met with a social worker who lives in the Beit Yisrael community and had coordinated this volunteer project before. She gave an important enrichment lecture about working with the elderly.

During subsequent sessions we shared the high points and difficulties that arose, brainstorming for solutions when necessary. The people we volunteer with can have really complicated stories, and sometimes just sharing was really vital for the student – on a practical and emotional level, it was important for them to unload, share and learn from each other.

This experience taught me so much. I came to give and I can say wholeheartedly that I got from this no less than I gave, and probably even more.



Beit Yisrael

Kvutzat Reut

I really want to thank you for this special opportunity.

Leah

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