**Sderot Youth Realizing their Dreams**

*The KKL-JNF Houses being established in the Negev and Galilee encourage excellence among young and help to narrow the gap between Israel’s central region and the periphery. The first KKL-JNF House was established in Nof Hagalil in the north, and now KKL-JNF is establishing a KKL-JNF House in Sderot, just a few kilometers from the Gaza border.*

The establishment of the KKL-JNF House is being made possible thanks to cooperation between JNF Canada and KKL-JNF. The Negev Dinner fundraising evening, which will take place in May 2020 in Winnipeg, will be dedicated to this project. The guests of honor at the event will be **Ted and Harriet Lyons**, long-time friends of JNF Canada.

The Lyons are currently visiting Israel, and they made sure to visit Sderot and the KKL-JNF House in Nof Hagalil, in order to get a sense of this unique educational project. Before these visits they also had a chance to plant a tree in Tzora-Hanasi Forest in the Jerusalem Mountains.

“It’s very exciting to be part of the Israeli story,” said Dr. Ted Lyons. “Israel has always been at the frontline of creativity and innovation, and people here are doing all the right things for all the right reasons. They are investing in children and in the future, and giving them the best that is available. Creating an opportunity for children to lead a successful life is a wonderful thing, and it’s very exciting for us to be a part of this.”

Dr. Lyons is a professor of radiology at the Health Sciences Centre at the Manitoba University in Winnipeg. His wife Harriet is a retired teacher, so for her, the visit to the KKL-JNF House was especially moving. “We came to Israel with the goal of learning about the country and getting an impression of the changes taking place here. We are very proud of what we have seen,” she said.

During their visit, the guests from Canada lit the first Hanukah candle together with a group of teenagers who study at the Nof Hagalil KKL-JNF House, including **Yuval Milgrom and Itai Gabso,** two sixteen year-olds who are participating in a cyber course at the KKL-JNF House and who dream about being successful hi-tech entrepreneurs in the future.

“Thanks to the KKL-JNF House, I’m making progress towards the goals that I set for myself and towards realizing my dreams,” said Yuval. “There are a lot of opportunities for teenagers in Tel Aviv, but now we have a special place of our own here,” Itai added. “KKL-JNF is giving us tools for our future. This is a place for us to learn, enjoy ourselves and also to meet friends.”

The visit to the Nof Hagalil KKL-JNF House was led by House Director **Avi Mousan**. “These educational centers are open to each and every boy or girl who wants to succeed in life,” he said. “There is nothing similar to this unique anchor anywhere in the state of Israel.” He noted that the goal is to duplicate the local success and to open more and more KKL-JNF houses throughout the country.

The next day, the Lyons went down south to the city of Sderot, where they visited the plot of land where the KKL-JNF House will be built. As they walked around the site, they tried to imagine how it will look in the future.

The Sderot House is currently in an advanced stage of planning. It will be designed in a youthful and innovative manner and the site will include a variety of technological means. Activities will include tutorials for tenth to twelfth graders in order to improve their matriculation exams results. Studies take place in small classrooms with professional teachers and personal accompaniment by tutors. The House also promotes informal education, and holds social activities, enrichment lectures, educational outings and activities geared towards strengthening the values of love of the land and increasing community involvement.

At a meeting with Sderot Mayor **Alon Davidi**, he expressed his great appreciation for JNF Canada’s commitment to building the KKL-JNF House. “Together, we will establish a house here that will give our young people the skills they need for the 21st century,” the mayor said. “There are a lot of economically challenged families in Sderot, and the new center will really help their children. We are building the KKL-JNF House at a central location in the city so that it will be accessible to everyone.”

“We look forward to coming back when the house is built and seeing the fruits of our dedication to this project,” Dr. Lyons responded.

When people live so close to the Gaza Strip border, it’s impossible to ignore a building’s security aspect. The KKL-JNF House’s structure will be protected from rockets so that youth will be able to study there and feel secure, and their parents will know that they sent their children to a place where they are safe from danger.

While touring the city, the guests saw an exhibition of the remains of rockets that landed in Sderot over the years. They visited a playground where of course there are a number of shelters. At the Camel’s Head observation point they had a view of the border. When the atmosphere seems so calm and serene, it’s difficult to imagine how in one minute everything can change radically, when a deafening siren sends everyone running to the shelters.

“In Canada, we hardly ever hear about the security situation in Sderot and the surrounding region,” Harriet Lyons noted. “Only when you are here can you begin to understand what the local residents are dealing with,” Ted Lyons added. “We firmly believe that the KKL-JNF House will be a safe place for study and social activities, which will bring hope to local children.”

Sderot youth were excited to hear about the new project. “It’s wonderful that my friends and I will be able to come to the center of town and improve our grades,” said sixteen year-old **Netanel Shapira**. “The activities at KKL-JNF House will be free of charge, which creates equality between children who come from economically stable families and those who have less,” said **Adi Nahum**, who is also sixteen years old and from Sderot.

The plan is to build an additional ten KKL-JNF houses throughout Israel in the future. KKL-JNF World Chairman **Daniel Atar** shared the vision: “Our goal is to make it possible for each and every young person to realize their maximum potential. It’s very heartwarming when you hear how KKL-JNF houses open up new possibilities of success and break the glass ceiling that children from the periphery face. There are incredible people who are growing up in the Negev and Galilee, and our job is to give them the opportunity to achieve the highest accomplishments our people are capable of aspiring to.”

“The sky is the limit” is a slogan written on one of the walls at the KKL-JNF House in Nof Hagalil. When you meet the Israeli youth and the visionaries who accompany them, you understand that when there is an appropriate springboard, even the heavens can’t stop them. With the support of the Lyons and other good friends in Canada and throughout the world, KKL-JNF ensures that this springboard will be provided to the future generation of the state of Israel.

Photos: Israel Peretz