

OPENING THEIR HEARTS

Pitchon Lev is renowned for providing millions of food baskets and other basic items to Israel's needy, but its educational and empowerment programs for disadvantaged teens are equally admirable / Natalie Page

One day, while I was broadcasting my program on 91 FM, a woman approached me at the radio station and pleaded in despair, "please help me, my two children and I are starving," recalls Nissim Zioni. "I asked my listeners to lend a helping hand, and for those who are in need of food and clothing to come to the radio station. The endless stream of people in need for the most basic life provisions that subsequently arrived made me realize the severity of the financial strife people in Israel are encountering, which is only increasing with time, and I decided to do my best to alleviate their suffering."

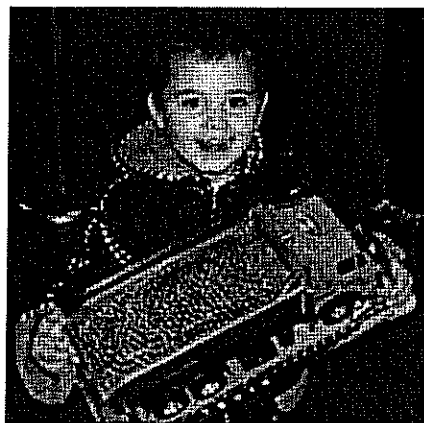
This life-changing encounter led Zioni to give up a successful career as a radio presenter and DJ and devote himself to helping others. The result was "Pitchon Lev" (opening one's heart), an NGO that since 1998 has been working to reduce the number of hungry, poor and needy people in Israel. Their task is, needless to say, not a simple one.

According to the National Insurance Institute of Israel's 2008 Poverty and Social Gaps Report, there are over 1.6 million citizens living beneath the poverty line, out of which close to 800,000 are children. Among them are a mother who walks around with her baby in a shopping cart because she cannot afford to buy a pram; a divorced mother of seven, the youngest only two and a half years old, who has no means with which to shelter her kids in winter from Jerusalem's cold weather; and a woman from Rishon LeZion who has no money to buy food for her two children.

These women are but three of the approximately 2.64 million poverty stricken individuals and families that Pitchon Lev has helped during its 12 years of operation. It does so by providing humanitarian assistance, empowering teens to break out of the cycle of poverty and lobbying government on social change issues.

Food baskets

Pitchon Lev started out as a distributor of food, clothing and other basic necessities to the poor, operating out of two national aid centers, one in Rishon LeZion, serving the center of the country, and one in Carmiel, serving the north. "My initial dream was to distribute 100 food baskets each month and, amazingly, today we are giving out 4,000 baskets," says



Zioni, the founder and CEO of Pitchon Lev.

"We also distribute 1,000 food baskets for infants, and 20,000 items such as clothing, shoes, toys, games, books, school bags, linens, baby goods and more to those in need throughout Israel. A basket of foodstuffs, worth NIS 250, provides food for approximately two weeks for a family of five." Each basket includes basic items such as dry goods, bread, vegetables and refrigerated products. The infant food baskets typically contain baby formula, diapers, jars of puree and other foodstuffs essential for proper infant development. "We also provide barbershop and hair cutting services, employment guidance and legal counseling," notes Zioni.

Pitchon Lev extends its services to all who arrive at the centers regardless of their gender, religion, creed, race, ethnicity or nationality. It caters to people from all walks of life: the physically challenged, elderly, new immigrants, families with many children, unemployed, working poor, single-parent families and lone soldiers.

Those in need are referred to the organization from all over Israel by social workers. Yet, Zioni points out, "we respond to every request for help, even in the absence of a social worker's referral. We provide them with a food basket and basic items of clothing on the spot, and ask that they obtain a letter from a social worker for the next time they come."

The organization's 20 paid employees and hundreds of volunteers also help out in soup kitchens, senior citizen centers, shelters for battered women, orphanages, shelters for



teens at risk, regional councils, municipalities, and other organizations which distribute food. "Our assistance is extended with a lot of dignity and love," notes Zioni. "We are very sensitive to the way we approach those in need, fully aware that they care more about the way they are treated than the food baskets they receive."

Realizing Ilan Ramon's vision

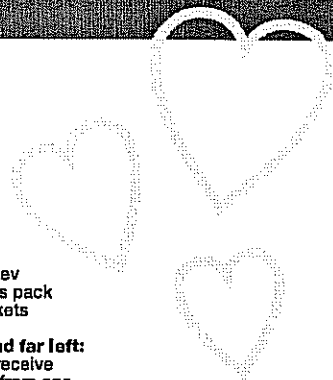
Understanding that providing food parcels is not a long-term solution for Israel's impoverished youth, Pitchon Lev eventually expanded its activities to also include working with underprivileged children in order to ensure that they have the opportunity to reach their full potential. This support comes in the form of the Ilan Ramon Touching the Horizon Educational Center, which operates a number of educational and empowerment programs for disadvantaged teens. Named for Ilan Ramon, the first Israeli astronaut, the center works to realize his vision of educating the future generations of Israelis.

Operating since 2002, Touching the Horizon's flagship program focuses on youth from underprivileged families who have the potential and motivation to succeed. The seven-year program supports the students from 10th grade through their army service, till they



Pitchon Lev volunteers pack food baskets

Below and far left: Children receive new toys from one of Pitchon Lev's aid centers



a significant positive impact on the lives of countless disadvantaged families and youth. Meeting the people we help and interacting with them is a painful endeavor, but at the same time it gives us the strength and conviction to continue in our humanitarian task. And there are also moments of great satisfaction such as the joy of seeing a teenager from a needy family that joined the Touch the Horizon program receive his certificate of matriculation."

Pitchon Lev's ongoing challenge is to col-



Pitchon Lev provides humanitarian assistance, empowers teens to break out from the cycle of poverty and lobby's government towards social change issues

enter into society as adults. "We go to schools located in poor neighborhoods and select the 25 or so students most suitable for the program," explains Zioni. Throughout their high school years, program participants receive a hot meal three times a week, followed by an enrichment or educational reinforcement session. The program's participants are supported by a team of skilled professional educators, guidance counselors, psychologists, and organizational consultants to ensure that they successfully complete their high school studies, receive their matriculation certificates, and enlist in the IDF.

"Once they graduate, we arrange an army prep course for them, which strengthens them both physically and mentally, and we follow their progress while they are enlisted to ensure that they do not drop out along the way," explains Zioni. "We also prepare them for civilian life before their release from army service, and follow their progress during their first year as civilians." Zioni mentions the partici-

pants from the city of Akko as an example of the program's success: "If I would have told you three years ago that these students would graduate from high school, receive a certificate of matriculation and enlist in the army, you would not have believed me."

In the current scholastic year, the program is operating in five schools, located in Rishon LeZion, Lod, Tel Aviv, Akko and Petach Tikvah, and is offering approximately 120 new participants a chance at a better future. All Touching the Horizon activities are authorized and supervised by the Welfare and Education Wing of Israel's Ministry of Education, and are led by a professional team headed by Professor Joseph Kattan from the Faculty of Social Work at Tel Aviv University.

Looking ahead

After 12 years of hard work, Zioni is confident that his life-changing experience led him in the right direction. "Pitchon Lev has made

lect as much money and food donations as possible for their humanitarian activities. "We are now gearing up toward a massive Passover food package distribution initiative, with the goal of providing holiday food parcels to 30,000 families, and we are also putting much effort into raising funds for next year's Touching the Horizon's program. It is very important to help us through donations because we want to expand our important humanitarian activities and give hope to more children so that they will be able to stand on their own two feet as adults and be contributing members of society." ■



For more information about Pitchon Lev, please call +972-3-5711117; or +972-52-5251507; or go to www.pitchonlev.org.il/en and choose a family to support. From Israel, you can donate a meal at a cost of NIS 18 by sending a text message with the word lev to 2747.