

# For the vets, it's Pittsburgh paradise

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By HOLLY LEHMAN, Chronicle Staff Writer

Avi's book is called "Don't Lose your Head," a story about his recovery from a wound during his 20 years as a soldier in the Israel Air Force. It's a lesson in perseverance and determination, traits which have brought Avi to this point in his life, a 44-year-old father of two visiting America for the first time as a guest of American Friends of Israel War Disabled.

"When I was wounded, I was in a coma for two and a half months and when I woke up I said to myself, 'Now I can only go forward -- I must go forward.'" Despite being paralyzed on the entire right side of his body, Avi set his mind on living life to its fullest.

"I was paralyzed but I gave extra -- I had good willpower," he remarks. And while walking through the streets of Shadyside or observing the wonder of Niagara Falls or visiting the nation's capital, Avi was living the results of that willpower.

"I was dreaming of here always, it's like a paradise.

Here in America is the best feeling in the world, everybody's friends," he exclaims, adding, "I think I bought my wife and children half of Pittsburgh," referring to his shopping spree.

Avi and nine other Israelis disabled in war were treated to two weeks of a combination of pure bliss, entertainment, education and a little TLC, something most grown adults will never experience, let alone disabled veterans of Israeli wars.

"It's just a little bit of a thank you for a big loss on their part," states Louise Silk, co-chairman of this year's program along with her husband, Leonard, and

Harvey and Merrille Weissman.

Packed into the two weeks were a tour of the city, a day trip to Niagara Falls, a Shabbat dinner and Shabbat services at Tree of Life, an entire day at Hidden Valley Resort, a shopping extravaganza throughout Pittsburgh, a Pirate game, a trip to Washington, D.C.,

a day at the Science Center, a day sailing on Lake Arthur, a Sunday at Three Forks and a trip to New York.

Most important though, are the relationships built on pure mutual respect and admiration, that the vets and the hosts develop over the weeks.

"I love being with them,"



LEADING this year's Americans for Israel War Disabled group are from left: Harvey and Merrille Weissman, co-chairpersons, Shlomo Segev, leader for the vets and Louise and Leonard Silk, co-chairpersons.

says Roberta Letwin, who hosted Avraham Sidi. "My children, my husband, are all enjoying this, it's the most wonderful experience," she shares.

"At first my older child told me he would have nothing to do with this and now he's trying to call off work everyday. And Sidi wants to take my little boy home with him -- he really cares about my children. My kids wake up and right away they want to know where Sidi is," she exclaims.

Letwin and her husband, Jeff, along with Louise and Leonard Silk, Merrille and Harvey Weissman, Barbara and Bruce Booken, Meryl and Dale Lazar, Margie and Stan Denver, Sarah and Bob Mantica, Maggie and Jan Levinson, Meryl and David Ainsman and Judy and Rocky Wein literally dropped everything for two weeks and catered to every

whim and need of their guests. From carpooling to cooking, the hosts put the rest of their lives on hold to show these men their gratitude.

Louise Silk says, "Planning 10 families for 10 vets is really a lot of work. When they get here, it's worth every moment."

Operating on a \$20,000 budget, American Friends of Israel War Disabled relies heavily on its host families to not only lend a bed, but meals as well. Silk estimates that in addition to giving their time, host families "pay for a lot."

American Friends of Israel War Disabled has been an on-going effort in the Pittsburgh Jewish community for 17 years. Support for the group is privately funded through individual donations, independent of any organization.

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# 'Pittsburgh Paradise'

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It began when Pittsburgher Sylvia Robinson was visiting Europe and noticed an Israeli man trying on shoes with his prosthesis. She started up a conversation with him and discovered the program was in place in many European cities and, Silk says, "She said, 'I'm doing that, I'm bringing them to Pittsburgh.'"

Over the years, the number of participants in the program has remained around 10, allowing the group to become close to both each other and the Pittsburghers involved.

By design though, the number of Pittsburgh families is gradually expanding its reach. Once a family hosts a vet, they may not do so again unless they chair the entire program another year. It is possible for past hosts to chair one day's activities in future years. Silk explains, "We solicit only those who know the program."

Bonnie Gehl, a past host, was a chairperson for this year's shopping extravaganza. At the end of the day in a Shadyside cafe, Bonnie was reflecting on highlights of the day.

"As we were walking along, one of the men said to me 'I think I'm in a dream world,'" Bonnie related. It is those sentiments, which are echoed fairly often, that make the two weeks worth every dime and every second to all involved.

Margie Denver says, "It's not a sacrifice at all, my family would love to do it again."

Alex Wenger, guest of Sarah and Bob Mantica, says, "They're the most wonderful people I've ever known and I mean it. I always thought America was the best and the biggest and it is." Alex, who walks with a limp due to injuries, explained that he had greater access to public places in the US through ramps, curbs, etc., than in Israel. "The freedom is here, you can feel the freedom, the liberty, what the constitution says -- we can feel it in the air," he exclaims.

Shlomo Segev, who acted as leader for the vets, has organized 10 trips in Europe but never in the US. "I was afraid to come here, everything is so huge," he admits. But once here, Shlomo, who is 47 and suffered internal injuries in 1967, allowed himself to relax and enjoy.

"The group of men is lovely. Everyone comes from a different part of Israel and everyone is different from the other but all together we are a very special group. We have never met before but when we go back we will all be friends," he says with confidence.



ENJOYING a day at the summer home of Sylvia Robinson, founder of the American Friends of Israel War Disabled, are the ten visiting veterans and their host families.

He added, "The Pittsburgh families are wonderful. They take care of everything -- I call them mother and father. We all feel like the little kids. For the past 30 years, as a father, I cared for everybody and nobody cared for me. I was the organizer, the driver and now everything is arranged for me, they give me everything, it's unbelievable.

"Even in my job I am the organizer. I am a police officer and I have 120 officers under me and I have to care about every one. Here, this is something different," he marvels.

Josef "Yossy" Azar, who stayed with the Ainsman family, offered, "It's a full time job to take us, pick us up, and keep it all together, but we're having fun days. I like it here very much, I could live here with my family all my life."

Though most of the vets shared those feelings, they all looked forward to the prospect of returning home to Israel.

Chosseim Morad, a Druze who stayed with the Silks, said, "I dream all the time of coming to America and now that I'm here I dream all the time to go back to Israel already. Here we are doing whatever we want, but all the time we are thinking what is happening in Israel."

Morad, who was shot in the leg during a clash with the Hezbollah, tells of how they shot his friend. "We love Israel, we live in Israel, and we have to go to the army -- if we don't, who will?" he challenges.

Though he is enjoying his stay in America where he acknowledges he can escape the everyday pressures of the Arabs and the army, he stands strong in his beliefs for living an Israeli life.

Other vets presented Rabbi Alvin Berkun with a similar challenge. Wenger asked, "If you pray every year, next year in Jerusalem, why don't you come?" When Rabbi Berkun replied that the Israelis need Jews in America, Wenger said, "We need you more in Israel."

Moshe Amran, a guest of Bruce and Barbara

Booken, was injured in an accident with a tank in Sinai in the war of '73. After spending a week on the streets of America, he came to some practical conclusions.

"I bought a pair of shoes here but they weren't very cheap. A car and a house are cheap here but everything else is the same price or cheaper in Israel. And the food is not good at all -- American food is junk food, not real food," he comments, adding, "The girls here are beautiful but they are more beautiful in Israel."

"America is not for me to live, America is for two weeks and that's it. I love Israel very much. All of Israel is like a family and here it's not like that. Here you can live near somebody and not be interested in them or their life," he observes.

Despite a yearning for good Israeli food and friendship, there is no hiding the true and mutual admiration that has grown between these two unlikely groups -- disabled Israeli war vets and American men, women and children.

"They are very special," Meir Darom says of his hosts Jan and Maggie Levinson.

Roberta Letwin explains, "Sidi can't wait for us to come meet him in Israel. It's an extension of our family and our connection to Judaism and Israel. I'm gonna cry when they leave."



DURING a recent press conference, Israel Air Force Major Gen. Herzl Budinger said that Rami Dotan, who is serving a 13 year prison sentence for diverting millions of dollars of US funds for Israeli arms purchases will not be allowed to speak personally to U.S. officials. The U.S. is hoping for an interview once the new Israeli government is in place. (IPPA/Vered Pe'er.)