

view
from
a volunteer



MICHELE KLEIN

The boys in our hostel, in Gedera are messed up – messed up enough to be referred to our establishment by the juvenile courts and the social services. And our job is to help them leave all that mess behind and become good and productive citizens.

How do we do this? Each boy has a bike. Two or three times a week, they go out riding in the countryside with their counsellor. They chase each other along the dusty trails, struggle up hills, let off steam and let go of tension. They mend punctures, fix breaks, and change gears. They stop to help another in need. They ride with local cyclists and are members of Groopy, a groovy community of cyclists with a terrific sense of humour and good will.

Ran Rod is one of the Groopy crowd. His yellow shirt shows that he is a qualified bike teacher, youth and cycling guide. His special shoes, tight pants, tanned face and shaved head give him the strong, masculine, streamlined look. Ran is a volunteer; he spends many patient hours with our boys, teaching them the tricks of getting about on two wheels on all terrains. He is definitely a role model for the boys. They obey his every word. He also teaches them the art of repair. With the help of the Groopies, he collected many second-hand bikes and the boys worked on them to put each one in good working condition. One night, Adi (another Groopy rider, of course) arrived at the hostel with a big trailer. He loaded 40, yes, 40 bikes into the trailer and delivered them all to a secret address in Tel Aviv.

The next afternoon, the hostel boys, the Groopies and I made our way to this secret location. It is a shelter for 'battered' women and their children. It's a big house with a lovely green lawn and a locked gate, surrounded by a high hedge.

These women have run away from violence at home. Our boys know about such violence – that's why they live in our hostel – but of course no one talked about this that afternoon.

Tali, a social worker at the shelter, our boys and Groopy volunteers helped each woman and each child find a suitably sized bike and adjust the seats to the right height. Somehow we all got to the Yarkon Park in north Tel Aviv, with all the bikes and safety helmets.

"Come on, let's go!" "Move on now!" The kids were excited. More Groopies joined us, some with their children. By this time it was dark. But lights and laughter bounced off the Yarkon river. The happy party set out along the river in the direction of the sea. At the end of the path they discovered a Dr. Lek ice-cream parlor. Bikes dropped to the ground and sweaty kids ran in. Dr. Lek donated 40 balls of ice cream, which somehow turned into about 200 balls... leaving everyone thirsty. Nearby Max Brenner, the chocolate outlet that caters to prestigious hotels and gourmet stores (not to our sort of crowd) donated 40 cups of heavenly hot chocolate, arranged by Katia, who is as sweet as the chocolate. Now with renewed energy, they all returned to the path along the river.

At the tail end of the group, G. (one of our boys) made sure no one would be left behind. One of the smaller girls was not used to cycling and she was tired. G. waited for her, helped and encouraged her and turned their ride together into a pleasant game. A bond grew between them as they called out to each other. At the end of the trip, G. discovered that the girl was Arab. The boy held a stereotyped view that there is no room for Arabs in our country. But this girl didn't fit into the picture he had in his mind. He was confused.

After the sandwich dinner, the shelter children presented thank-you letters to each hostel boy. The Arab girl asked specially to give her new-found hostel friend her own note of thanks. The look on G.'s face showed that she was still his friend. So what if she is Arab, she's a nice little person, and her life probably hasn't been that easy either. Then it was time for bed.

But who could sleep after such fun? The Groopies opened their computers to download their feelings on their chat forum. "A huge thank you to the hostel boys who helped us to mend the bikes with Ran in Gedera" came out in large red bold letters at 11pm. "You are wonderful, each one of you, and it was a pleasure to get to know you." One minute later, in red again, "sweetest thanks to the fantastic kids in the shelter and to their mothers for all the love and patience you revealed all along the path tonight, you are amazing and I have no words to say how wonderful you made us all feel today."

Ran joined the forum after midnight. "It was amazing! I am so moved. The boys outdid themselves. They helped transport the bikes, led the group along the path, and kept the group together... I was moved by the thanks I received and by the smiles and happiness on the faces of the boys. These boys are in the hostel because they did something bad to society. They have learned a lesson and given of themselves to do something good for society. Now they feel appreciated. May they continue in this way and find the right path through life..."

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