

UN showcases Israeli NGOs bridging social gaps among youth

By DANIELLE ZIRI
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Teens are working together 'to achieve a better future' for Jewish state.

NEW YORK – It was the first time that 17-year-old May Ofir was sitting in a circle alongside representatives from various countries at UN Headquarters in New York. Yet, when it was her turn to speak, she did not seem intimidated at all.

Ofir is from Hod Hasharon.

She suffers physical disabilities as a result of being born with a spinal cord malformation. Ofir is shorter than most teenagers her age and struggles to run, or to dress herself in the morning.

She arrived on Wednesday as part of a forum organized by Israel's Permanent Mission to the UN to discuss the social inclusion of disabled youth. At the meeting, Ofir said she was proud to speak about Krembo Wings, an Israeli youth movement aimed at bridging the gap between children with and without special needs.

"Krembo Wings is the only place where I am not judged by how I look," she said during her address. "Segregation can lead to alienation and distance.

This needs to be changed, and the sooner the better."

Wednesday's event was organized by Yarden Holzer, Israel's youth delegate to the UN.

"It was very important for me to raise awareness and to shed light on organizations that display areas of social inclusion that may not be familiar," she told The Jerusalem Post. "I find that social inclusion – both of kids with disabilities and of children from different societal groups, ethnicities or histories – is a wonderful way to bring people together."

Holzer added that as the situation in Israel is becoming more tense, it is important to "see how youth from different social groups and ethnicities are still working together.

"They come together just as children to have fun and build a better future for all of them together, and it's important for us to remember that even though there are horrible things going on back home, the children – the future of our nation – are still working together to try and achieve a better future," she said.

Nir Brunstein, chairman of the Board of Krembo Wings, accompanied Ofir. For him, although presenting the movement's work at the UN was a "very special and moving" experience, it is "just another step in the long road that the organization still needs to go through."

Brunstein joined Krembo Wings several years ago for very personal reasons. His 15-year-old daughter Tal, who was born with severe cognitive disabilities, is a member of the movement. As Tal is unable to speak, Brunstein told the Post that the only way he knows she is having fun while participating in the activities is because she smiles every time she is surrounded by other “Krembo Kids,” some with disabilities, some without.

In his speech to the forum, Brunstein pointed out that the children do not notice the differences between them. “If we start explaining the differences to them, we will widen the gap,” he said. “We need to let them run the show.”

Bridging the gap between children from all backgrounds in Israel is also the mission of the Jordan River Village, a camp for sick children from across social, economic and ethnic groups in the country.

Despite the current tensions, camp director Yakir Sternin said that at the Village it is “business as usual.”

“We made a conscious decision that the whole subject of religion, wealth, and origins is simply a non-issue,” he told the Post. “When two kids look at each other and they know that they are both here because they are both fighting for their lives, all this really doesn’t matter at all.

“When we talk about conflict resolution it is important to always remember that it is in our interest to sustain the interaction,” Sternin said. “I believe that at the Jordan River Village we are planting the seeds for this.”

David Roet, Israel’s deputy permanent representative to the United Nations, who gave opening remarks at the event, pointed out the importance of having an inclusive forum in light of the current situation in Israel.

“It is shameful that these days we see children pick up knives and daggers, instead of toys and books,” he said. “Over 30 percent of the population of the Middle East is between the ages of 15-29. We hope that as a society, we learn to direct them towards taking advantage of their potential and making positive impacts on regional social development.”