

# THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

## 14 years in the making, a Paul Newman ‘fun’ camp for sick children opens in Israel

Raising a little hell, with a very serious purpose, at a remarkable new 60-acre camp in the Galilee

BY MICHAL SHMULOVICH June 11, 2012



Paul Newman, the impossibly handsome half-Jewish actor/activist/humanitarian/ professional racing driver who died in 2008, woke up one morning in 1988 and felt sad. He thought to himself, according to a friend: How unfair it is that seriously ill children don't get to “raise a bit of hell” like other youngsters! So he set out to remedy that injustice.

That is how Newman started the first Hole in the Wall Gang camp for kids with life-threatening conditions (now known as the SeriousFun Children's Network) in Connecticut over two decades ago. The name was a reference to one of Newman's films, the American cinema classic “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid,” in which he starred with Robert Redford. Newman's character, Cassidy, was the infamous leader of the Wild West's Hole in the Wall gang.

Paul Newman when he was in the US Navy. The SeriousFun Children's Network is one of several philanthropic projects Newman started. (photo credit: US Navy, Wikimedia Commons)



On Sunday, the Jordan River Village — the 14th and newest member of the Newman chain of camps — located in the Lower Galilee region of Israel, had its very own official grand opening. The only camp of its kind in the Middle East, the Jordan River Village seeks to be play-land for kids with chronic illnesses in the broader Middle East. It has been operational for nearly six months.

While the premise is fun, the purpose of the Jordan River Village is serious. It looks illness unflinchingly in the face, and gives the more fragile members of society a chance to experience thrills while embracing their needs. Situated on a breathtaking 60-acre expanse due west of Tiberias, and nestled between the hills that overlook the Yavne'el Valley and the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River Village is a picturesque oasis and recreational center.

Considered a place of “yeses” for many children who are used to hearing “no” or “be careful,” the Jordan River Village features zip-lining, horseback riding, swimming, arts and crafts, music, performances, dancing — all tailored for children in wheelchairs or with disabilities who, in other situations, would not be able to experience such adventures. Their wildest dreams become a reality in one week. The positive impact that fun has on the kids, some of whom are often isolated for long periods of time, is tremendous, said a major Jewish-American donor who flew out for the kickoff event.



Zahir (center) and his brother and mother, Kifach, at the Jordan River Village grand opening Sunday. The camp has made Zahir very happy, said Kifach. (photo credit: Michal Shmulovich/Times of Israel)

Eighteen-year-old Zahir, from Umm al-Kutuf, a small Arab village near Baka al-Gharbiya in the northern Galilee, first came to the camp a few months ago and despite his thalassemia, a genetic blood disorder, was unanimously crowned the debka dance champion. He taught his friends at the camp how to do Arab folk dance, and soon it was all the rage.

Sporting a trendy haircut, Zahir was shy and incredibly soft spoken, with deep-set black eyes. He looked young for his age.

His mother, Kifach, and his brother, attended the event with him. “He just had his spleen removed,” said Kifach. “His illness is so hard,” she sighed.

She explained in layman’s terms that his blood doesn’t create one of the components it’s supposed to — the globin chains that make up hemoglobin. He suffers a lot, she said, turning her head to the horizon. Yet at the camp, surrounded by his friends, Zahir was like a popular butterfly that was let loose. He showed his friends music videos and laughed at their jokes.

John Read, the camp network’s CEO, said that these days, a lot of the kids survive their illnesses and the camp experience is the invisible component “that allows them to reach beyond their illness and create social connections, build resilience, and leave isolation.”

The camp accepts for its weeklong programs children with cancer, cerebral palsy, cystic fibrosis, hemophilia, familial dysautonomia, neurological disorders, rheumatic diseases, heart diseases and other life-threatening or chronic illnesses — all for free — from every background: Muslim, Druze, Christian, Jewish, Arab, secular, ultra-Orthodox, poor, rich.



Eyal Adler (left) and his friend Benjamin sit patiently during the grand opening ceremony of the Jordan River Village camp. Eyal suffers from colitis. (photo credit: Michal Shmulovich)

Another popular young guy, Eyal Adler, 13, was a mini-spokesman for the camp, eager to explain how things worked when asked about his experience there: “It’s amazing! You have so many adventures, with other kids who know how it feels to be sick, just like you. And, it was the first time I spent a whole week outside of my house. I’ll never, ever forget it.”

He said he suffers from colitis, a digestive disease which, in his case, is chronic. At the the camp a menu was catered to his needs so that he could eat and enjoy himself. “I can’t eat milk products,” he explained. He seemed wise beyond his years, possibly the result of having to deal with the illness for the majority of his life.

With bright green eyes and an oversized cap, Eyal added beamingly: “I rode a horse... and I’ve been to America to tell people about the camp, too.”

CEO Read noted that there’s a session planned for Palestinian children from the West Bank this summer. When asked if there’s a joint session for Israeli and Palestinian children scheduled, he answered: “Maybe... We take small steps.”

## *Armed with a vision*

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The Jordan River Village represents the culmination of over 14 years of dedication and perseverance from key private and public individuals. The camp's founders, Marilyn and Murray Grant, an energetic senior citizen couple, recalled how a random chain of events led to their vision for the project.



Marilyn and Murray Grant, the founders of the Jordan River Village camp for children with serious illnesses. Armed with a vision, they set out to make it a reality. (photo credit: Michal Shmulovich)

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Marilyn was given free tickets to a benefit jazz concert in Connecticut that turned out to be for the Hole in the Wall camps — and during the intermission she had a few moments on her own while her husband went to get a beer; she doesn't drink beer. Marilyn started flipping through one of the pamphlets nearby, which happened to be about Newman's Hole in the Wall camps. That's when her vision to bring one of Newman's joyous camps to Israel began — for all kids, who are from all over the region, with all kinds of illnesses, the couple said. "They didn't have any money... But they had the dream and the tenaciousness to see it through," said their daughter, Lisa. "It was their *retirement* project," she teased.

When the Grants later moved to Israel (they have since moved back to the US), they set out on a remarkable and lengthy journey — meeting with this politician, convincing that businessperson — and raised a sum of \$30 million for the camp. Soon after, they had a constellation's worth of Israeli stardom behind them — notably Israeli actors Chaim Topol and Gila Almagor, politicians Isaac Herzog and Moshe Kahlon, and philanthropists Sara Lahat and Dov Lautman — and set out to win the support of the Israeli government, which ultimately contributed \$6 million for the construction of the camp. Overall, it cost some \$100 million to build, not including additional yearly operational costs.



Israeli actors Chaim Topol and Gila Almagor are key figures in the Jordan River Village Camp (photo credit: courtesy, Jordan River Village Camp)

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Topol, the actor, recounted a cute anecdote about how the government eventually got on board: At 10 p.m. on an evening in November 2005, he got a phone call from Shimon Peres, then a minister in Ariel Sharon's government, who told him that he was invited to a cabinet meeting at 10 a.m. the next day to give his pitch on the "kids' camp." He hadn't expected the meeting and was a bit startled, but naturally, agreed to attend.

The meeting was short, Topol said, and all the ministers were noticeably moved, with some even holding back tears. They unanimously agreed to support the initiative.

On his way out, Peres told Topol to call him when he got home. Reaching home a bit past noon, Topol made the call to Peres, who asked him if he had heard the news, and Topol said no. "Sharon just dissolved the cabinet [to create a new political party, Kadima]... Well, now you know why you had to come at 10 a.m.," a light-hearted Peres explained. Topol had managed to narrowly score a last-minute victory in a country where governments can be made and unmade overnight.

At the opening event, addressing the mixed Israeli-American crowd, MK Herzog, who held the post of minister of social welfare when the project got under way, said the camp was a model for coexistence around the country. For example, that many of the camp's volunteer counselors hail from local Jewish and Arab towns, like Tiberias and Baka al-Gharbiya.

The idea of coexistence in the Lower Galilee is not new. It is almost reminiscent of a scene in "Exodus," in which the character portrayed by Paul Newman, Ari Ben Canaan, tells his childhood friend Taha, an Arab, that the area near their two villages (also located in the Lower Galilee) is home to *two* peoples — the Arabs and the Jews. In another one of the movie's memorable scenes, Canaan gazes wistfully at the tan-tinged hills surrounding him when he talks about his people, the land of Palestine, and peace — the very same hills, in fact, that the Jordan River Village campers now look out upon.