



## For very sick children, Israeli camp a fun diversion

By Michele Chabin, Special for USA TODAY

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GIVAT AVNI, Israel – Alla Masarwa, a 10-year-old with dark curly hair peeking out of her helmet, stood before the climbing wall, ready to tackle the imposing structure.



Debbie Hill

Campers Edden Bargai, 16, and Itay Barshai, 14, go for a ride this month at the Jordan River Village camp in Givat Avni, Israel.

Determined to make her way to the top, she took her time, pausing occasionally to catch her breath. When she'd made it, she beamed as the adults and kids waiting below shouted, "*Kol hakavod Alla!*"

If Masarwa, an Arab citizen of Israel, didn't know the Hebrew term for "Way to go!" before arriving at the Jordan River Village camp for children with serious illnesses, she would pick it up by the end of her late-August session.

Masarwa's new friend Noa Kahn, a freckle-faced 9-year-old Jewish girl who, like Masarwa, has a growth disorder requiring daily injections, likewise picked up some Arabic at the bilingual camp — a member of the SeriousFun network of camps founded by actor Paul Newman.

"Our vision is to bring all kids together, regardless of background, so they can have fun," said Dani Steiner, camp director.

That's no small feat in Israel, where Jews and Arabs usually choose to live in separate communities. Outside of a handful of bilingual schools and co-existence groups, Israeli kids from different religious and ethnic backgrounds rarely have the opportunity to form meaningful relationships.

Known until recently as the Association of Hole in the Wall Camps, the network started by Newman in 1988 has 28 camps worldwide. Jordan River Village is the first one in Israel, located west of Tiberias in the lower Galilee and founded in 2011 by Murray and Marilyn Grant, a Jewish couple from Sarasota, Fla.

Newman "was very supportive of this important initiative to expand" in Israel, said Linda Askenazi, executive director of the American Friends of Jordan River Village. "He was very excited to have a camp that would be not only about fun but about peace."

Jordan Valley River is where Jews and Arab children can see how much they have in common in overcoming serious illnesses, according to Dorina Ulitsin, an animated 17-year-old who has neurofibromatosis, a tumor disease that's caused curvatures of her neck and spine.

"This is a place where the kids have gone through something difficult, and that's something we share," Ulitsin said before rushing to the hangar-like dining hall, where she and a dozen campers performed an exuberant dance routine under a sign that read, "Happy Eid al-Fitr."

The night before, after the end of the [Jewish Sabbath](#), the camp had participated in a dance party to celebrate the Muslim holiday, which marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan.

However, the staff didn't attempt to integrate Israelis with the group of Palestinians from the [West Bank](#) and Gaza that attended the camp this past year. "We felt putting together kids from the Palestinian territories and Israel was just too much," Steiner said, referring to political tensions. "That doesn't mean we won't do it in the future."

Ameer Azaiza, a 20-year-old volunteer from Kfar Dabburiya, a nearby Arab village, thinks that will change. A graduate of the Maine-based Seeds of Peace co-existence camp that brings together children from conflict zones, Azaiza decided to sign up for Israel's National Service program to volunteer at Jordan River Village.

"Military and National Service aren't obligatory for Arabs, and my decision to serve wasn't accepted by everyone in the Arab community," Azaiza said with a wry smile. "Even so, I'm very, very happy to be volunteering here and to be building some bridges."

Though integration is a vital part of Jordan River Village, the camp's main goal is to foster fun and independence, participants say.

"This is my first time away from home, and it's fun doing things my parents don't always let me do," said Kahn as she gazed up at a zip line several yards above.

"I feel freer here without my mom and not having to hear, 'Don't do this, don't do that,'" said Edden Bargai, 16, diagnosed with cancer when he was 9. "Sometimes you just need a break."