



Ryan Brownfield and Yakir Sternin. Meged Gozani

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Ryan Brownfield, 38, lives in Columbus, Ohio, and arriving from there; Yakir Sternin, 38, lives in Binyamina

Hello, Ryan, can I ask what you'll be doing in Israel?

Ryan: I'm part of a nonprofit organization called SeriousFun Children's Network, and I'm here to visit the Jordan River Village, of which Yakir was one of the founders and is now its director. It's a sleep-over camp for children with chronic and life-threatening diseases. There are some 30 camps like it around the world, and I visit them to check that everything is operating as it should.

How did you get into this work?

Ryan: It's a very specific field. I established the [first] camp in Ohio – Flying Horse Farms – and I ran it for years, which is actually what Yakir is doing here.

What happens in the camps?

Ryan: The camps are for children aged 7 to 18. There are basic camp activities – archery, sleeping in tents, rope-climbing – all adapted for sick children. Many of the staff are medical people, such as hematologists, oncologists and nurses.

Yakir: The physicians and nurses are volunteers. In Israel we have about 1,000 volunteers every year, and of course the camp is free for the children.

Ryan: Basically, the camp is intended for children with serious diseases.

What falls under that category?

Ryan: Cancer, for example, but also juvenile diabetes, epilepsy, serious skin diseases. It's only when children are very close to death that coming to the camp is problematic – we can't take the risk of not being able to look after them.

Yakir: Our aim is for them to enjoy the camp, to be able to participate actively.

Ryan: It could also be that you're ill with cancer but your disease has been in remission for seven years – so you're “too healthy” for our camp.

Yakir: There are three programs in Israel. The youngest children come with their whole family for a weekend. The older ones spend a whole week here, on their own. The week-long camps are each intended for children with a specific disease, let's say Crohn's and colitis, or cancer. We also have a special third program for children with special needs, autism or cognitive problems.

What activities do the children like best?

Ryan: In the Ohio camp, the most popular activity was a rope course – rappelling, zip line, monkey bridge. They are also very enthusiastic about sleeping in nature, in a tent under the stars. These are kids whose parents usually don't dare leave them with their grandparents. We try to create a safe environment for them, so they can go beyond their limitations. Our goal is to alter their self-perception, their feelings about themselves and their capabilities. We celebrate the small successes and build a lot of them, so the child will go home with a great experience of success.

Do the camps have an influence beyond the week or weekend themselves?

Ryan: Parents say that the camp influences the children's day-to-day life. There's a Yale University study about similar camps showing that the children return physically stronger and respond better to the medicinal treatment, and that there is an increase in self-confidence. They are hospitalized less.

Very impressive.

Ryan: A large part of the camp [experience] is meeting children with your condition, or someone who is getting better, and seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. Some of the children, especially the younger ones who come with their families, don't necessarily know that it's a medical camp. They just have a good time.

For you, is the work emotionally wearing?

Ryan: I love it. It's not difficult, but if one of the children dies, it's naturally very sad and heartbreaking. You have to understand that the camp itself does not deal with the difficulties and the disease, it's pure fun. The only sad part is parting with the children when they go home. It's work that gives you a perspective.

Yakir: When my daughter gets upset over a pimple, I remind her about a girl with a serious skin disease whom she met in the camp. Her complaint disappears in a flash. I practice perspective in my private life, too, because my third child was born with nonfunctioning kidneys. He had a transplant six years ago, and three years ago was a camper, so I feel I have the right to say that it's a happy place where children and parents learn to say thank you for a good day. It's not a job, it's a way of life.