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RIVLIN PLEDGES TO ASSIST JORDAN RIVER VILLAGE IN GETTING ASSISTANCE

BY GREER FAY CASHMAN
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President of Israel Reuven Rivlin meets with head of Jordan River Village and children who live there. (photo credit: HAIM ZACH/GPO)

Timing is everything. A Jordan River Village delegation called on President Reuven Rivlin on Sunday in order to update him on what is happening in the Lower Galilee Village near Tiberius before his upcoming visit there. Lucky for them, the meeting came just ahead of a meeting between Rivlin and Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon.

The Jordan River project, which is affiliated with the Paul Newman SeriousFun Network, is modeled on his “Hole in the Wall” summer camps for children with chronic, genetic and life-threatening illnesses, as well as those with special needs.

The Village was the brainchild of the late Marilyn and Murray Grant, who in 2000 met with celebrated actor and Israel Prize laureate Chaim Topol and shared their dream of establishing a Village in which all seriously ill children in Israel, regardless of religion or ethnic background, could have a fun filled week or weekend free of all the trappings of their illnesses – so that for a little while, they could be like regular children.

The Grants were American immigrants from West Hartford, Connecticut, who made aliya in 1971, were deeply involved in the struggle for Soviet Jewry and in bringing to Israel Ethiopian Jews and helping in their absorption, but who after 35 years in Israel had to return to the US for family reasons.

Topol told Rivlin that what really convinced him to become involved with the project was his meeting with Paul Newman, beloved in Israel as the star of the film Exodus.

Topol had in turn shared the Grants' dream with his good friend and former president Shimon Peres, who put his whole weight behind the project and organized a cabinet meeting at which he presented each minister with a written outline of the project and asked each of them to sign their approval. Topol was invited to come and make a 10-minute presentation at 8 a.m.

Peres asked afterwards if anyone was against the idea. No one voiced any objection. He then asked everyone to sign and told Topol that he should hang around for a more definite confirmation.

At 12:30, Peres said to him, "Did you hear the news?" He had not. Peres dropped the bombshell that the government had been dissolved. Seeing Topol's crestfallen expression, Peres hastened to add: but not before the government had approved a NIS 20 million grant for the project. The government also made available some 60 acres of land in the Lower Galilee.

The Village opened unofficially in August 2011, with some 15 children, and officially in June 2012, with 60 children.

Currently the annual Jordan River Village intake comprises of 1,800 youngsters from all sectors of Israel's population, as well as from the Palestinian Authority and Gaza. In addition, there are 700 volunteers, who come in different capacities throughout the year, who also stem from all sectors of Israel's population.

Topol is chairman of the project and the CEO is Brig.-Gen. Yuval Halamish, without whom, Topol told Rivlin, nothing would go as smoothly as it does.

The two men told Rivlin that the Jordan River Village has extensive services that enable it to function all year round and to provide medical services and treatment for children who suffer from 25 different illnesses. Moreover, at Jordan River Village almost everything is provided on a volunteer basis. The Jordan River Village is in regular contact with the SeriousFun Network and works closely together to continuously improve its services.

The head of the medical center, Dr. Herzl Gavriel, works with 80 volunteer doctors who provide services at different times throughout the year. In addition, there are 25 volunteers who are doing a year of community service prior to entering the army, as well as young people doing National Service at the Village.

The volunteers befriend the sick children in order to laugh with them, play with them, give them

new experiences and new challenges – which they help them to confront and overcome, eat together with them and sleep in the same quarters.

The Village has a gymnasium, sports facilities, swimming pool, camping area, arts and crafts center, a theater and more.

When Rivlin asked about funding, he was told that no child and no family is asked to pay. Funds are generally raised from donors in Israel and the US.

“What about the government?” asked Rivlin.

They replied by saying that the Finance Ministry gives nothing, the Education Ministry gives something to assist the children with special needs, and the Social Services Ministry says: “You’re doing a good job. Keep it up.”

Rivlin was taken aback by the attitude of the Social Services Ministry and said that he would speak to its minister, Haim Katz, as well as to Kahlon. He also suggested that he would do what he could do help raise the money for any special new project coming up.

Due to his position, he said he could not do any direct soliciting, but he would certainly bring such an important matter as easing the lives of sick children to the attention of the business community with whose leadership he has close relations.

Einat Danino from Modi’in, who is doing a year of community service before she goes into the army, told Rivlin that she was one of a group of 14 such young people together with a group of six young people fulfilling their National Service.

She told the president about a time when she was assigned to a group of youngsters with epilepsy and found one of the girls crying. When she asked what was wrong, the girl said that her most recent medical tests had indicated a significant improvement in her condition. She worried that if she gets any better, it will mean that she can no longer come to the Jordan River Village.

Avital Leibler, 15, of Jerusalem, who also suffers from epilepsy, said that when she came to the Village during Hanukka, she immediately felt that everyone else in her group was just like her – they all had epilepsy. During the time she spent at the Village, she did a lot of things that she had not thought herself capable of doing, something that she found very encouraging after coming home. On days when her illness was stronger than her willpower, she thought about all that she’d done in the Village and this helped her get through the difficult period.

The Village also hosts family weekends free of charge with special but separate activities for both parents and children. It was explained to Rivlin that many parents are stuck at home with a sick child because they can’t afford to pay for a caregiver and the Jordan River Village gives them some breathing space and allows them to relax.

Rivlin said that he was very moved by all that he had heard, and recalled that prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, there was a culture of mutual responsibility, with people helping each other in times of need. Jews who spoke Arabic helped Arab neighbors, and Arabs who spoke Yiddish helped Jewish neighbors, because everyone realized that fate does not discriminate between people of different genders, or religion, or national or ethnic backgrounds.

He recalled that his own mother had been part of this mutual-responsibility ideology and said that the most noble thing that anyone can do is to give of themselves to the community.