

To the Summer that has Arrived - a Day at the Beach

Dozens of Palestinians and Israeli volunteers attend a day of fun at the beach in Sdot Yam.

Shay Cohen, August 3, 2022

In the early morning hours on the beach at Sdot Yam, dozens of gray-haired, twinkly-eyed volunteers from the Road to Recovery Association slowly congregate. These volunteers, on other days, drive sick Palestinian children from the border crossings to receive treatment in Israeli hospitals. They join up with the Arab youth from the "Think About Others" Association from Kfar Kara and the El Ajjel Association from Arara in the north. Arabs and Jews coming together on the sand and responding to Alona's instructions, navigating their assignments with them. This is certainly an unusual sight.

Alona and Noam are giving the last instructions to the Arab youth before the guests arrive and together with the volunteers from the Road to Recovery, they disperse on the beach, some inflating rubber paddling pools for the toddlers, some setting up stations for handing out breakfast, others distributing hats, offering assistance with setting up a sunscreen station, a swimming inflatables station, a shiatsu treatment station, and face painting, kayaks, jugglers, soap bubbles, while the rest of the volunteers wait for the guests in the water.

The first of the four buses arrives and a bunch of colorful volunteers led by Elmo, Avigail and Moish Oofnik from Sesame Street, which in Arabic is known as Iftah Ya Simsim, went to greet the visitors. Tired and somewhat excited families of Palestinian parents and children from all over the West Bank get off the buses, are given sunhats and make their way down the path to the beach. The children and some of the adult Palestinians are being treated in Israeli hospitals for serious illnesses and complex medical issues.

It's hard to describe the excitement at the sight of the blue sea and the strip of golden sand. Worried parents, silent with joy at the sight of their children, exuberant, jumping up and down and pointing happily at the expanse of blue before them. Most of them have never seen the sea before. I try and soak in the intensity of the experience and am left speechless. At these moments I am so happy for Yoram Asheim, whose camera lens is able to capture what evades me.

I watch Mona with astonishment, whose heart overflows at the sight of her 7-year-old daughter Joffran, who has been hospitalized for the last three months and was discharged especially from hospital for a few hours for this fun beach day, splashing around in the sea water and happily hugging Yuval Roth like a beloved grandfather. Slowly the other buses arrive and the quayside fills with people. More than 200 people, who, for a few hours, leave behind their pains and ailments, checkpoints and restrictions and with Yael Roth's tireless encouragement they enter the sea and joyfully splash water everywhere. Beautiful young girls in hijabs wait in line to have their faces painted with blue butterflies and flowers by Ayana, the talented daughter of Roi Barnea. Chana, together with Sami and his students from the maritime school at Jisr az Zarka with a team of guides from the maritime department of Kef Yam are handing out life jackets, putting the children onto kayaks and watching over them.

I look around at the crowd around me and notice a million different things taking place that fleetingly downplay what is going on beyond the beach, beyond the checkpoints. I smile to see two-year-old Omer march straight into the water, and his father, Abu Omer (Ahmad), stands amazed at seeing the infant discover for the first time the ebbing waves washing over his tiny feet...Eighteen-month-old Asma, splashing in a blue tub and stretching her arms up in the direction of the open sea...Nurit who moves between the children and puts hats on their heads...Amatzia who has been in the water for an hour with a boy in a kayak...Hamza, 21, who just three months ago was on his last legs, removing his prosthesis and rowing in the kayak as if he had been reborn...Eight-year old Erin, whose head alone peeps out from under the sand and everyone is taking pictures ...Noga Shavit Zinger, who accompanied the families from Tarqumiya, hands out shovels and pails to the toddlers ...Amar, a sweet child sitting in a wheelchair with a serious burn on his stomach, and therefore unable to go into the water, is made up as a lion and playing with Ada Ginzach's camera, pushing on all the right buttons and saying to her "look at me."



In the background is a Darbukka circle drumming energetically, and in the center of the circle there is dancing and clapping ...The wonderful Lorraine and Rami are on the loudspeaker, getting the youth volunteers and patients to dance...

It is already afternoon. Everyone is called to eat lunch, and they sit to eat under the shade covers. The heat is heavy and the first excitement becomes a calm that wraps us all with a soft blanket, as if this is just another regular day at the sea. Children float weightlessly in the quiet water, exhausted parents drag plastic chairs into the water and let their tired legs soak in the cool water, sending peaceful waves into their weary bodies. An enchanted atmosphere settles on the beach and families of parents and children, young people and volunteers look peacefully at the waves and listen to the sweet voice of Hamza, singing Arabic songs to the applause of all present.

I look again with high regard and perhaps even with marvel at the groups of our volunteers who have gathered by the refreshments stand managed by Ethel. They catch up and share experiences and stories of the day. In these precious moments I understand that what went on here was unbelievable. How can we explain that it is possible and even worth it, to overcome the walls of fear and hatred and simply take the necessary humane step on the 'Road to Recovery'?

This is the opportunity to say words of heartfelt thanks and appreciation to the many volunteers who grouped together to produce this successful and unforgettable event for us and for the more than 200 Palestinian children and their parents, the majority of whom had never before paddled in the sea.

First and foremost, thanks and appreciation to Alona Abt who orchestrated this complex operation, with talent and love, down to the last detail. Thanks also to Naama Goraly, the CEO of the Association, Tirza Heimann, Kika Price, Noga Shavit-Zinger, Dan Morgenstein and Nili Gardin who accompanied the buses to and from the border crossings. To the wonderful volunteers who worked on the beach under the blazing sun and helped with serving meals, assistance inside the water, tours of the beach, as lifeguards, hosting the journalists and visitors, photographing and covering the event, assistance with the kayaks, with sailing, the reflexology and shiatsu treatments, yoga, circus workshops, the soap bubbles activity and board games, organising activities with the children, the face-painting, the lifeguards and the rest of the activities that made the day enjoyable for the guests. These people include Yuval and Yael Roth, Benny and Yael Carmeli, Ethel Roter Katz, Yael Hayut, Yael Noy, Tammy Samson, Didi Sol, Danny Nahav, Shay Cohen, Noya Bachar, Yoram Asheim, Ada Ginzach, Neta Be'eri, Tsurit Sarig, Roi Barnea and his daughter Ayana, Uzi Be'eri, Yael Yariv, Anat Price, Kolo Or, Doron Avrahami, Tsefi Shacham, Nimrod, Tzuri King, the lifeguards, Zachi Halevi, Chana Farchi, Ruthi Barkai, Gili Inbar, Ofer Weiss, Hanania Glubman, Tali Feferman, Ilana Naor, Yitzhak Aloni, Nurit Tolnai, AviHu Katz, Amatzia Hanani, Doron Goldstein, Hanan Shaliv, Robby Berman, David Mosko, Eddy Cohen, Pinki Adler, Lior Davidi, Na'im El Baida, Yuval Cohen, Udi Gabizon, Moshe Greenberg, Maryam Abed El Rachim, Ruchale Yosef, Doron Mellis, Shay Cohen, Itzik Weinstein, Ofer Weiss, Shuli Dichter, Albert Amit, Yael Hayut, Sylvia Adler, **And of course, many thanks to the volunteers and organisations that joined us:** the amazing Loren who follows, recruits and supports the Association's activities. The "Think About Others" Association, the El Ajiel Association, Rani Germana, Sami Alili, with 3 students from the maritime school at Jisr az Zarqa.

We apologize if we have forgotten to mention any of the volunteers and donors involved in the event.