

Keeping Them Off the Streets

By Wendy Elliman
UJA Press Service

Shlomo was eight years old and had escaped from Syria by walking across the mountains to Turkey. Everyone — first at the Netanya absorptions center, and then in Jerusalem where he settled with his parents, wanted to hear his stories. But, once the stories were told, Shlomo no longer drew an audience. No one had time to listen. He fell behind in school and his anger against home and school mounted. By the time he was 14 he was rarely anywhere but on the street, on the verge of becoming a gang member.

It is here that Shlomo's story takes a different turn from that of an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Israeli teenagers currently heading down the road to delinquency. He was befriended by a youth worker, who brought him to the Preparatory Center for Youth Studies—usually called the Interim Station—in downtown Jerusalem.

"The Station's aim is to help Shlomo and youngsters like him to cope, both educationally and socially," says Lisa Kaufman, coordinator of Youth and Technology Projects for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. "The Station makes kids believe in themselves and fit into society."

"Shlomo was 16 when he came to us," says Rami Sulimani, the Station's director. "He was big, tough and angry. We told him he was welcome at the Station one day a week and could choose what he wanted to do here." Sulimani remembers that Shlomo remained tense and jumpy all through the first year. "He shied away from arithmetic and language classes but agreed to try the computer. That gave him confidence. Then he eagerly tried technical drawing."

One of the JDC's main emphases for the Station is modern technology. "It was assumed that all this kind of population was fit for was basic workman skills," says Kaufman. "But the future for which we're preparing these kids is technological, and we want to introduce this into the Station."

The installation of five computer terminals has proven a successful beginning. "We

thought the kids would vandalize the computers in days," says Sandra Gruber, one of the Station's part-time teachers. "But nothing has been damaged — not even the fragile floppy disks."

The Interim Station has been helping an annual 140 teenage dropouts since 1978. Two years ago it joined with the JDC, funded largely by American Jews through the UJA/Federation Campaign, who was seeking to create a model outreach system for Israel's marginal youngsters. Many of the ideas developed by JDC's reserach teams were shared by the Interim Staff and so the partnership began. "We were working with very troubled, difficult kids, and we lacked backup — financial and academic. Now that the JDC is with us we not only have their close support, but they've also brought in prestigious institutions," says Kaufman.

Coordination with a range of institutions is a cornerstone of the JDC approach in building a national youth rehabilitation model. With continued support from the United Jewish Appeal, the JDC hopes to reach out to larger numbers of troubled youngsters in Israel each year.

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