

SHOLMI YOSSEF



Chairman of the Board Dvir Benedek (center) with Honorary President Batia Ofer (left) and Cofounder and CEO Denise Bar-Aharon

Close your eyes *and make a wish*

By Paul Alster

THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD ISRAELI school-boy Koren sat at the head of the seemingly never-ending boardroom table and chaired the meeting of the world famous ZIM international shipping company. Senior executives were present, others joined the meeting via video conference from Hong Kong, and the teenager whose dream had been to spend a day in charge of this massive shipping line was loving every minute of his time in the spotlight.

CEO Eli Glickman moved aside and let the young man who suffers from a life-threatening condition get on with the business of the day. They would later leave the boardroom to attend a briefing at the main operations center where Koren was shown the route plans of all the company's ships and

informed of the attempts of pirates to board one of the vessels. He was then taken out onto one of the huge cargo ships and shown the ropes, briefed in just the same way the regular chairman receives his briefings on the day-to-day activities of one of Israel's biggest companies. It was something Koren had always wished for due to his family interest in sailing, and Israel's Make-A-Wish foundation made that young man's wish come true.

For over 22 years Israel's Make-A-Wish has sought to grant wishes for very sick children from across the multi-faith Israeli society. From an initial desire of the founders to grant a few wishes to help improve the lives of local children, the organization, established in the United States in 1980 and represented in 48 countries across the globe, has blossomed over the last two decades and

now grants as many as 300 wishes a year. Each wish is carefully planned and meticulously researched, with the help not only of the Make-A-Wish staff and volunteers, but also of everyday Israelis and others from much further afield, who want to give hope and encouragement to children suffering from serious illnesses.

For these children, some as young as three years old, others as old as 18, having something they have always dreamed of to look forward to and work towards is no less crucial to their well-being than the daily treatments, the surgeries they undergo, and the medicines they receive. And that's a fact. Don't take my word for it, it's been clinically proven.

"Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar, a famous speaker and writer, who teaches at IDC Herzliya ... was able to prove that wishes do change lives and

are literally transformational for a child,” Denise Bar-Aharon, CEO and Cofounder of Make-A-Wish Israel, told *The Jerusalem Report*. “When children know that they can wish for something and it comes true – from meeting the President of the United States, to meeting the cast of “Les Miserables” on stage in London when you have loved that show so much, to riding an elephant, or being whatever you dreamed of being – something happens within the body that helps them to fight better, to have more of an appetite.

“It was scientifically proven in the study to have a positive impact. The study called “The Make-A-Wish Impact Study” [was conducted by Prof. Anat Shoshani under the supervision of Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar] and has been translated into seven languages and shown at many events around the world.”

It was back in 1996 that Denise Bar Aharon, who had volunteered on Make-AaWish projects as a teenager in her native southern California, realized she wanted to start an Israeli branch of the charitable foundation following the tragic death of her younger brother, David Spero, at the age of just 29. David had been studying for a Masters degree at Hebrew University in Jerusalem when he was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. He had always been involved in charitable pursuits, and after the initial mourning had passed, Denise and her husband Ari wanted to do something in her late brother’s memory that would encapsulate his philanthropic ways and altruistic outlook on life.

Make-A-Wish seemed the perfect solution, but establishing a charitable foundation from scratch and gaining access to the lives of families whose children were suffering very serious illnesses wasn’t an easy hurdle to overcome.

“When you first begin a project such as ours, it is very important to gain the confidence of the medical teams and hospitals,” Bar Aharon explains. “There we were, a young couple in our 30s, asking to come talk to children in hospitals and tell them they can have whatever they would like. These children are at the most vulnerable time of their life and people just didn’t know who we were. We had a credibility issue to overcome, but my husband and I convinced the medical teams that we could interview kids with critical illnesses. They agreed, and we started with oncology, and they told us about a child called Edmen.”

Edmen’s wish was to have a computer, a wish that was granted for the Israeli Muslim

child who became the first of more than 3,500 children whose wishes have come true thanks to the charity that was established in memory of David Spero.

“Here in Israel we grant wishes to Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Bahai children, and more. A child is a child is a child. It doesn’t matter when you’re in the hospital; mothers from all different religions are sharing food and experiences. That is the true battle, the battle for your life, not land. That is what is so unique about the State of Israel. When I’m at a global conference, what is so beautiful is sitting at the table with colleagues from Turkey, and Pakistan, and Dubai. We’re all sitting around the same table talking about how to grant better wishes.”

Make-A-Wish reaches out to children with many critical illnesses, not just cancer. The child could be in need of a transplant, have heart disease, AIDS, muscular dystrophy, and many other extremely challenging conditions and illnesses. The wishes come via the child’s social worker, or following a newspaper article, or if Denise has appeared on a TV show that displays the telephone number and asks families to get in touch. The child themselves can also get in touch, but all relevant medical papers have to be checked in order to ascertain that they meet the required criteria. Once this has been satisfied the process of finding out just what wish the child has been dreaming of begins. And it’s the child’s wishes that are paramount.

“Two people go out to the home of the child; we call them Wish Catchers. Why two? So that it remains the wish of the child, and not of the parent. The child might say they really want a computer because they love

graphic art, but the parents might say, “Oh, didn’t we discuss Russia, or maybe Disneyland?” So you have to have one person sit with the parents and one with the child [in order to ensure they hear directly from the child what it is they wish for].

“We do have cases where the child is too sick to communicate, and the parents might say, for example, “I know how much my child loves mermaids. Could we possibly come to the hospital and fill the whole room with mermaids?” They know the theme that would most appeal to their child, and in these cases it is so very important for the parents to help guide us.

“When a child is sick it is the whole family who is suffering. When we go on that interview, we have a form used in all the Make-A-Wish countries that helps lead us to the right wish. It will say, for example, “What is your favorite food? Your favorite color? Music? If you had a million dollars what would you do with it?” Or to a younger child, “If you had a magic carpet where would you go?” We ask a lot of questions and try and take them on a journey.”

A child’s imagination has no bounds and often, despite battling very serious conditions, the children wish for experiences that might come as a surprise. Not only the wish like Koren’s to be the CEO of ZIM, but so many other amazing experiences. The four categories of wishes are: I want to be ... ; I want to go ... ; I want to meet ... ; and, I want to have

“Recently, an incredible young man from Jerusalem called Nitai (11) said he wanted to be the general manager of the Ritz Carlton. So, while he was still sick in hospital,



TOM PELEG

Koren, 13 years old, whose wish was to be the CEO of Zim

Israel

we asked him to write to the general manager. He received a reply from the general manager himself and some gifts from that organization. He was told that the whole team was waiting for him to come and manage the hotel. He'd never had a suit, so the volunteers went with him to buy a suit for his big day. It was a very special case, and he's still with us and doing quite well.

"We get all sorts of wishes," Bar-Aharon recalls, "but soccer is among the main requests. Asking to go see a special game in Spain, for example. Disneyland remains a huge wish. Often we tell kids that there are other organizations that can take them to Disneyland so maybe they want to choose something else to do with us, but some still say they would like to go to Disneyland with us and their family, not in a big group with other children.

"The most unique and beautiful wishes stem from the "I want to be ..." wishes. When somebody wants to be a queen, or a chef, or anything else, it is just amazing how many volunteers come together to make this happen. We have an incredible program for companies called the Wish Challenge. We speak to building companies, or a bank, or an insurance company, and we give them the wish of a child and a big block of paper and we ask them to become a wish designer. We give them all the requests and wishes, the things the child particularly likes, and they create the magical wish. It is an incredible employee involvement project that has made people go "Wow!" It's an ongoing process creating the idea for the wish and then helping make it happen. Famous Israeli actor Dvir Benedek is our chairman, one of the most respected people in the industry, and Dvir has brought so many people into the projects who are willing to help.

There are any number of worthy charitable causes in Israel and raising sufficient funds is no easy task. Bar-Aharon notes that much of the donations for her organization come from "the same group of upper echelon individual donors – so you have constantly to be creative." The Wish Challenge involving individual businesses planning the wish for a child has been a big success, and there is also an annual art auction, an important source of revenue for Make-A-Wish, supported by Honorary President Batia Ofer together with Sotheby's, the auctioneers, and the Alon Segev Gallery. Leading overseas artists, alongside famous Israeli artists, are featured at the auction that takes place in



SHLOMI YOSSEF

18-year-old Romi, whose wish was to be a top fashion model, is photographed here with Denise Bar-Aharon handing Romi a picture of herself from her photoshoot

central Israel in June each year.

"We are very lean staffed and have just eight people working for us," says Bar-Aharon. "We are the lowest staff ratio in the benchmark of excellence of any of the organizations around the world, having the lowest number of staff granting the highest number of wishes. I take great pride in that because we also have approximately 150 volunteers. We say with transparency that 86% of every shekel goes to the wishes or the programing for wishes. The remaining 14% covers all administration costs."

It's not just major donors though; every penny, cent and shekel counts, and often surprises await the staff at the Make-A-Wish office.

"The other day a little girl came into our office having raised 300 shekels from selling bracelets. She'd heard about Make-A-Wish and really wanted to do something so she made bracelets, sold them outside her community center, and then came into our office with her mother and gave us the 300 shekels in small coins. So much credit to the mother."

The Kids For Wish Kids is another long-standing and successful project active in 70 Israeli schools. The schoolchildren learn about the importance of giving and have an annual Make-A-Wish day, sometimes selling Make-A-Wish products, or having a day where they have a home bake sale, or a basketball game, whatever they choose to do. Kids who have taken part in these projects and move on to the workplace some years later have often contacted the

organization saying they now want to do something with their company to help support the project and make a difference as an adult.

In Israel, some 600 children annually are diagnosed with cancer; then there are many more suffering from a host of other diseases and illnesses. Bar-Aharon, whose life path irrevocably changed those 23 years ago, continues to take inspiration from young people and their attitude towards overcoming adversity.

"You know, I was just watching David Letterman, and wrote down something from his interview with Melania Yousafzai [the Pakistani schoolgirl who survived an attempted assassination by the Taliban for daring to go to school, and went on to win a Nobel Prize and advocate for children's rights around the world]. I slightly adapted what she said, but essentially it comes out as: "Seeds of sadness were planted in you at one stage in your life, but from that planting has flowered something beautiful."

"That's something I'd like to share, on a personal level, given my own experience in losing my brother. We really are the privileged ones being able to try and create a better world," concludes Bar-Aharon. ■

To find out more about Make-A-Wish Israel and to get involved, please contact: +972-9-760-2848, www.makeawish.org.il, maw@makeawish.org.il

Paul Alster is an Israel-based journalist. Follow him on Twitter @paul_alster and visit his website: www.paulalster.com