

BUSINESS TURNS TEENAGERS AROUND

MICHELE KLEIN



'I'm not going to work another minute. I'm f---ing angry. It's not fair! He's a.....' The expletives and protests continued in earnest for some time, interspersed with strong drags on a cigarette. The boy's body swayed as he kicked the air with frustration. "I'm not going back to work; I'm leaving."

Mike (not his real name) was fuming about the fact that he hadn't had a toilet break when he needed one. He wore a vest, shorts, and a ring in his eyebrow. His scant beard shaded his clenched jaws, while the gelled spikes on top of his head added a few inches to his slight build. A young clown was sitting next to him, listening with interest and sympathy. She looked him straight in the eyes and explained calmly that he had good reason to be angry. She waited quietly for him to let off steam and then talked to him about what he would lose if he dropped out of the business and what he could gain if he stuck to his work patiently.

Mike is 17. He lives in a hostel for teenagers who have been placed in full-time care by court order. He grew up in a difficult environment and learned long ago that if someone treats you badly, you treat that person badly in return: quick reflexes and pre-emption are the key to survival. But this approach leads to trouble and that's one reason why the teenagers are in a rehabilitation framework.

These hostel boys work several days a month in a business venture that gives them work experience and responsibility. Mike and three other boys from the Nofit hostel rose at dawn this morning to set up and man inflatable water slides and trampolines at a wildlife park. This hostel joined forces with another hostel for youth at risk, Wing of Love, to provide a full-day event for the families of employees of the First

International Bank of Israel. This bank promotes business ventures for youth at risk through its Turning Point programme.

Similar enterprises include catering businesses, a goat dairy, an olive oil manufacturing company, an organic vegetable farm, water sports and printing services. At the same time as giving work experience to disadvantaged teenagers, these enterprises educate the public, by encouraging tolerance and acceptance of those who are different and vulnerable. The Joint (JDC), Ashalim and Zionut 2000 provide start-up support with contributions from corporate bodies: once a business is up and running, it should become self-sustaining.

This afternoon, one of the young visitors was too scared to get up onto a donkey's back, but Danny, a 17-year-old from Wing of Love, talked kindly to him, gave him a gentle helping hand, and assured him that he would be safe and would enjoy the ride. The kid's knuckles were white as he clutched the saddle, but the reassurance helped and by the end of the ride he didn't want to get out of the saddle.

"Respect for the donkey is as important as respect for the youth," his teacher told me. "The boys learn from the animals they work with". One year ago when Danny joined Wing of Love, he was withdrawn, angry and uncooperative. Now he says: "I am not like I used to be. I want to work and earn money. This place helps me a lot with my behaviour."

When they enter the rehabilitation framework, these teenagers are unused to working and unwilling to put an effort into anything. They had literally dropped out of school, home and society. But in order to take part in the business, they have to work

hard, show respect and become reliable. "They only receive full pay if they have done their share of work, preparing the event, hosting it, and clearing up afterward. Such a change from their old life takes time and a lot, really a lot, of support," Wing of Love director Boaz Miller explains. "The boys enjoy earning money, but they also understand that this project helps them to prepare for the work market when they leave the hostel".

One-third of the income from the park's visitors goes to pay the boys; the rest covers the costs of producing the event and maintenance of the zoo. "There is great demand for a venue for such child-centred events; you could run them here every day of the year," says Yuval Ofir, of Meltzaratz catering company, who has helped with three large events in the park. If Wing of Love ran the business every day, both the boys' wallets and the zoo would profit. So why doesn't it?

"If the boys were to run events every day," says Miller, "they would put no effort into school work, vocational training and sports. There would also be no time for the supportive dialogue and counselling that they need, or for family and community activities. They would probably soon lose their enthusiasm and see the business project as another chore. While it is not very lucrative to run only two to four events per month, this is the right balance in a rehabilitation program."

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