

The new recruit

A former juvenile delinquent overcomes the odds, and after an uphill battle with the IDF finally gains permission to serve his country

• By MICHELE KLEIN

Tomer's life is at a turning point, and not for the first time. He is about to enlist in the IDF. Unlike many youth today, Tomer wants to be drafted. Unlike those who choose to avoid military or national service, Tomer (his name has been changed to protect his privacy) wants to feel that he is contributing to society.

Tomer grew up in a less-than-promising neighborhood. He is the son of immigrants from Ethiopia. He suffered in school; he was frustrated there, an outsider, a failure. He yearned to be socially accepted, but felt lonely and angry. So he dropped out. At age 15, he was arrested and charged with committing acts of violence and vandalism. He was unhappy, and his parents were not proud.

After some months in a locked facility for delinquents, the welfare authorities offered him a chance for rehabilitation through full-time care at the Wing of Love hostel that was then just opening in Gedera. He could work every day, caring for the animals in the Wing of Love wildlife park at Kibbutz Kfar Menahem. Tomer discovered immediately that he liked the animals and took the authorities' offer — a turning point in his life.

Tomer, one of some 2,000 adolescents in Israel in full-time care by court order, was the first boy to be assigned to the Wing of Love program.

During a visit to Wing of Love, Welfare and Social Services Minister Isaac Herzog declared: "The youth at risk in the state's care arise from the illnesses in [our] society, but each adolescent has the potential to become a good citizen. As the Talmud says, 'He who saves one soul is as if he saved the entire world.'"

Programs such as Wing of Love face daily challenges in their attempts to find and cultivate that potential. And while the soul of a 16-year-old may appear to have been saved, the work is not always



MANY CHOOSE to avoid military or national service, but Tomer wants to feel that he is contributing to society. (Courtesy, Wing of Love)

irreversible. A person who has gone astray might lose his way again in the future.

At least Tomer knows he still has a caring mentor only a phone call away.

Two years ago, in his first weeks at Wing of Love, he found it difficult to work or study. He wanted to sleep a lot and when he did, he had terrible dreams. His demeanor and body language were stiff and aggressive — the remnants of survival skills he had developed in school, on the street, and in the lock-up. But soon, he

began to take an interest in the animals and to learn about them.

"After working in the park for a while, I decided to focus

on the horses," he recalls, saying that he promised to make caring for them his top priority. "So I began working with the mares. Every morning I fed them, cleaned their stable,

washed them — and myself too, sometimes — with warm water," he says.

Tomer adds that in addition to taking care of the animals, he "used to go to the horses"

whenever anything happened to him. "For example, when I was uptight, sad, happy — or just because I missed them and wanted to be with them. They really relaxed my soul. They communicated with me through their bodies and different signs and I understood what they wanted from me."

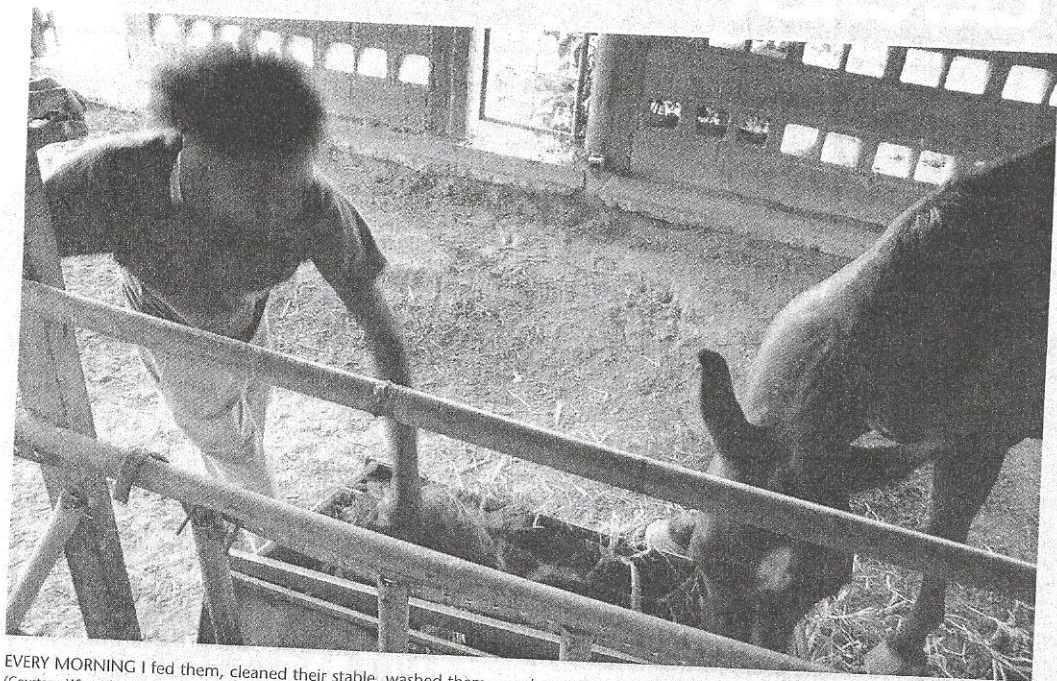
In addition to the satisfaction Tomer got from tending the horses, he also enjoyed art classes, where he discovered he had a talent for drawing and making necklaces. He's also deft at crafting the dream catchers — netted amulets that, legend has it, protect sleepers from bad dreams but let good ones through — that Wing of Love sells to visitors on "open days." Open days are Wing of Love's business therapy. With

help from Ashalim, and supported by the Joint Distribution Committee, Zionut 2000, The First International Bank, and other donors, business enterprises now serve to empower at-risk youth by allowing them to take responsibility and develop both social and vocational skills in a sheltered environment.

Tomer began earning money on open days. He guided visitors around the zoo, talking intelligently about the park's animals. His bouncy gait, the sparkle in his eyes, and his gentle voice charmed everyone. "What does it feel like to earn money?" one visitor asked him.

"I used to earn it before I came here, but illegally,"

'I used to earn [money] before I came here, but illegally. Now I'm happy to earn [it] the right way, through my work'
— Tomer



EVERY MORNING I fed them, cleaned their stable, washed them – and myself too, sometimes – with warm water,” says Tomer.
(Courtesy, Wing of Love)

Tomer replied. “Now I’m happy to earn [money] the right way, through my work.”

As he gained confidence, he began investing in his appearance. He dressed carefully. He tried out different hairstyles, and would frequently check the mirror. He liked girls and they liked him. And he wasn’t only worried about himself. Tomer showed a willingness to lend a hand to others, helping new arrivals to Wing of Love.

After a year, he was able to discuss his determination to “get on to the right path, to leave behind the silly things

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[he] did in the past,” as he put it. He began to dream about serving his country as a soldier in an IDF combat unit, and set about making this happen.

But being drafted into the IDF, despite his enthusiasm, was not easy for Tomer. The army, on principle, does not enlist youth with criminal records and rejected him. It appeared that despite all Tomer’s progress in his time at Wing of Love, he had failed. It would not have come as a surprise if he had

chosen to give up and go downhill again, but he didn’t. When he turned 18, Tomer signed on as an apprentice to a local carpenter. But he wanted to be a soldier. With the support of the Wing of Love staff, he appealed the army’s decision. He continued working and spent his nights at the hostel. He had a girlfriend. He was “normal.”

The army powers that be read his appeal and called him up for a string of interviews and tests. On December 12, exactly two years after he arrived at Wing of Love, he was accepted for enlist-

ment. In April, with great pride, he will put on his IDF uniform.

Tomer, our first case, is the first of our charges to enlist. He is showing other boys the way. We, the staff and volunteers at Wing of Love, hope they will follow in his footsteps, mend their ways and join the fabric of society by helping others, whether in or out of uniform. We also hope that Tomer will prove himself strong enough to cope not only with the hardships of army life but also with other

challenges he will undoubtedly encounter in the next few years.

Earlier this month, on the third night of Hanukka, Tomer’s childhood friends and his older brother joined

him and the rest of the Wing of Love community for a festive dinner. Boys and staff picked out the highlights of their time together over the past two years and wished Tomer well. One person sang

him a song, while another gave him a photo album that captured some of the years’ happy times. Many others encouraged him with warm remarks. The last person to speak was a volunteer who had taken the boys out for bike rides in the hills near Kfar Menahem.

“The part you always enjoyed most was the downhill – the fast, easy and fun bit,” he reminded them. “But to cycle uphill is a struggle. You have to work hard and sweat. And then you discover the thrill and satisfaction of reaching the summit. You did that! Remember that life is the same. It’s very easy to go downhill; the trip down is fast. It is the uphill struggle that takes time and persistence, which gives you the sense of achievement,” he said.

Tomer stood up, the Hanukka candles flickering next to him. He was holding a woolen hat, which he twisted this way and that. He licked his lips and swallowed. He was struggling. And then he looked up at all of us who were present, smiled and said, very softly: “Thank you!”

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RIGHT PATH. Tomer began dreaming about serving in an IDF combat unit, and set about making this happen.
(Courtesy, Wing of Love)

