

ONE ON ONE



'I SEARCHED for a place with a mission, and I came to a place with a very big mission,' says CEO of NATAL Orly Gal. (All photos courtesy NATAL)

# Invisible wounds

CEO Orly Gal opens up about NATAL's range of services and why she sees her work as a 'mission'



A MAN participate in an social art club offered by NATAL at its center in Tel Aviv.



NATAL VOLUNTEERS take part in a 'color run' to raise money and awareness for people suffering from trauma.

• TAMARA ZIEVE

Orly Gal, CEO of NATAL – the Israel Trauma Center for Victims of Terror and War – calls her place of work “home.” Located in the heart of Tel Aviv on bustling Ibn Gvirol Street, the building opens its doors every day to trauma victims, offering a host of professional support and therapeutic services.

At 9:30 on a Tuesday morning, it is

not yet at maximum capacity although there is already an elderly group serenely occupied by arts and crafts activities while the soft guidance of a Feldenkrais instructor emanates from another room and psychologists sit in their therapy rooms waiting for their first patients of the day. Gal says that within the next hour the building will be buzzing with life.

Our early-morning meeting is unavoidable as her team is busy getting ready for its annual “Running in Color”

event, which a few days later would see thousands of trauma victims, supporters, public figures and celebrities running through Hayarkon Park. During the run, participants would be sprinkled with colored powder to symbolize the “transparency” and internal injuries of emotional trauma.

“The colors are bright to bring happiness and hope,” Gal tells *The Jerusalem Post Magazine*, explaining that the purpose of the run is to raise awareness for those with post-traumatic





A NATAL volunteer works with children in Sderot to help them deal with trauma following numerous rocket attacks.

stress disorder as a result of terror and war, in an event that aims to connect body and soul.

She is visibly excited about the upcoming event and bursting with pride for her organization, where she has been working as CEO for the past 10 years after ending her army service in 2005 as deputy to the IDF spokesman.

"I searched for a place with a mission, and I came to place with a very big mission," she says.

Gal sings the praises of NATAL founder and chairman Judith Recanati, saying the NGO is the entrepreneur's life work.

"We always say she has three daughters and one son," Gal states. "NATAL is the son."

NATAL is located in a historic building where the Defense Ministry stood for 50 years.

"In 1973, a lot of bereaved families whose sons were prisoners of war came to identify pictures here," she recounts. "I wish the walls could speak."

Recanati bought and renovated the building to transform it into a trauma center, and today people from all over the world come to visit and observe NATAL's unique model.

NATAL'S SERVICES include a confidential helpline through which volunteers can quickly identify whether or not someone is suffering from post-trauma. For some, the weekly 25-minute conversations over the course of two to three years can be enough to heal them. For others, the helpline is not enough, so they are moved to the clinical department. Some people won't leave their homes, so therapists visit them on a weekly basis.

"The clinical department is all over the country," Gal notes. "We have 120 therapists across Israel, all experienced professionals. It's a multi-disciplinary treatment, tailored to each person, as everyone is different."

The treatment includes group or couples therapy, and movement therapy.

The NATAL team always inquires about family members to discover if any of them are also in need of attention.

"It's important to get treatment in the first year after the traumatic event," Gal stresses, "because you can return to life very fast."

She remarks that in the past month and a half in which Israel has faced almost daily terror attacks, the NATAL helpline has received 40 percent more phone calls than usual. Many of these calls have come from Jerusalem, which has been a flash-point of terror.

"People are afraid of the unknown," she says, "because you don't know where it will come from."

People affected by terror attacks in the past also seek assistance during times of stress, as their past experiences are dredged up.

NATAL staff members have been working in schools with teachers and children, with members of groups from abroad who must learn how to deal with the reality in Israel, and with municipalities. They also do a lot of "helping the helpers" giving support to rescue teams and police, sending mobile units to Jerusalem and other areas.

"It's a hard time," Gal says.

WHILE SOLDIERS are treated by the IDF until their last day of service, as soon as they are demobilized they can approach NATAL. The NGO's staff seeks out former soldiers on campuses, where many of them head after their post-army trips.

"Most don't make the connection between what happened to them and what might be happening to them now," Gal explains. "It's like a thermos that fell on the floor and contains broken glass on the inside but looks perfect from the outside. Many say they wish they lost a hand because that's an injury everyone can see."

Symptoms of trauma include flashbacks, aggression, an inability to sustain romantic relationships and an inability to concentrate. Children often start wetting themselves and want to sleep with their parents. After Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014, NATAL received a record number of inquiries from former soldiers.

NATAL also meets the needs of people with chronic post-traumatic stress disorder who don't work. The building provides them with a space where they can

participate in activities such as arts and crafts, cooking and sewing in a community of people in similar situations. It also organizes birthday and holiday celebrations, and takes groups to museums and other locales where they normally wouldn't go alone.

Gal stresses that the NGO's work is apolitical and caters to people from different cultures in different languages, including English, Arabic, Amharic, French, Spanish and Russian.

ON TOP of these important services, NATAL also works on prevention.

"The day after the war, people forget," says Gal. "This is the most important time for us to support these people. For them the war just started."

She notes that the professional teams working in the field often suffer from exhaustion, and NATAL provides them with support. It also provides teachers with the tools to identify PTSD in students, which can sometimes be mistaken for laziness.

Moreover, NATAL opens its doors to IDF casualty notification officers every Thursday, providing them with training on how to cope with trauma.

"They study here and have support groups, and work with families that have lost children to war or terror," Gal says.

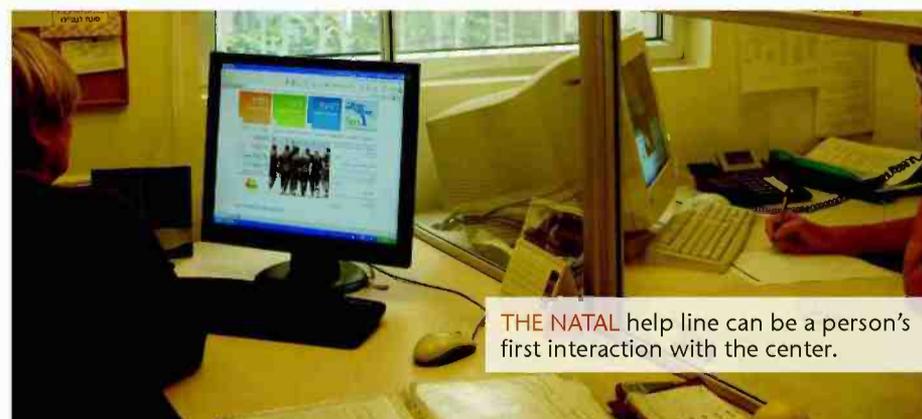
The building also boasts a testimonial center, modeled after Steven Spielberg's Holocaust Testimonial Project. More than 100 prisoners of war have used the center to give their testimonies in front of a camera. They receive DVDs of their testimonies; some show them to their families to help them understand what happened to them, while others leave directives to do so in their wills.

"It's unbelievable to see what it does for people to tell their stories in front of a camera," she says earnestly.

Questioned over how the NGO measures the effectiveness of its work, Gal says it has a research department that evaluates all NATAL projects.

"We check ourselves all the time, which is why we built a whole department of research and evaluation," she says. "We take the best professionals in the field. We learn all the time, and we fix and improve."

The best result, she says, is when PTSD sufferers who have undergone treatment no longer need NATAL's help, having learned how to help themselves.



THE NATAL help line can be a person's first interaction with the center.