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Program's Successes Defy Limitations

May 28, 2009

Lynn B. Edelman

Jewish Federation Feature

Mark I. Solomon is passionate about his two decades of involvement with Yemin Orde, an Israeli youth village that provides both a home and a future to 500 children and teens from all over the world.

During his tenure on the board of the Friends of Yemin Orde -- a network of men and women who provide financial support and leadership to the 54-year-old village -- he has witnessed many residents overcome tremendous obstacles and become successful members of Israeli society.



Israeli President Shimon Peres with Yemin Orde robotics team members

Yet some transformations are more dramatic than others.

For example, Solomon marvels at the school's remarkable success in the recent FIRST Robotics Competition, an international tournament launched in 1992 by New Hampshire inventor Dean Kamen.

Israel has been competing since 2005, with interest and enthusiasm in the contest growing each year. This year, some 1,200 students from 47 high schools competed in the national qualifying round.

"First-place honors went to the 20-person robotics team from Yemin Orde, many of whom were shepherds in Ethiopia just a few years ago," says Solomon.

Susan Weijl, Yemin Orde's director of outreach programs and development, says that "our educational programs teach children how to move from survival to leadership."

She stresses that success in competitions like these builds student confidence and helps kids realize "that they are destined for greatness."

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The school's robotics program, an extension of its science curriculum, is just five years old.

Engineers from the Israeli Navy shipyard in Haifa served as mentors and role models for the students, who had six short weeks to create a functioning robot from a kit of nuts, bolts, sprockets, washers, gears, electronics and a joystick.

Ten Yemin Orde team members traveled to Atlanta for the April international tournament-representing the State of Israel among 350 teams from across the globe.

The competition began on a Thursday, and the students had high hopes for the success of their entry, RobOrde.

Yet their optimism dimmed as they realized that the finals would stretch into Shabbat.

"Our young people faced a moral dilemma: How could they honor the Sabbath by refraining from work, while still honoring their obligations to represent Israel in the competition?" reports Weijl.

After a great deal of discussion, the Yemin Orde students arranged for the Tennessee team to operate their robot on Saturday, instead.

Their final score was a respectable rank of 53 out of 350.

Weijl expresses optimism that next year, the team will make the top ten. It's already gearing up for the 2010 competition, set to begin next January.

There is a strong local interest in Yemin Orde, which lies just south of Haifa in the Carmel Mountains.

Paul Silberberg, Solomon's friend and business partner at CMS Companies, serves as former national campaign chair of Friends of Yemin Orde, and is a longtime member of the organization's board of directors.

Yemin Orde also receives financial support from the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia's Center for Israel and Overseas.

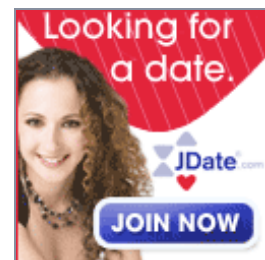
For more information, see: www.yeminorde.org.



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Members of the competitive Yemin Orde robotics team recently scored high marks in an international competition.

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