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Avital Friedman: Much needed to ensure safe, happy childhoods

By Avital Friedman

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Two years ago, my family left Israel to live in Tulsa. I accepted a position as the inaugural director of Haruv USA at OU-Tulsa, a training institute for professionals in the field of child abuse and neglect. The Schusterman Foundation established Haruv Israel in 2007 and Haruv USA here in August 2015.

In Hebrew, “Haruv” means Carob tree. There is an Israeli fable about a man who planted a Carob tree. When asked why he planted a tree that won’t bear fruit for 70 years, he responded, “So my children and grandchildren will get to enjoy it.” Haruv USA carries the same name because future generations will enjoy the fruit of our work.

Haruv USA’s mission is to support and nurture professionals dedicated to the prevention, identification, reporting, and treatment of abused and neglected children. We train social workers, doctors, nurses, lawyers, judges, counselors, teachers, and anyone who works with abused children and their families. We’re also connecting the many services here in Tulsa.

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In my time here, I’ve met amazing and devoted professionals. I believe the people who work with abused children speak a universal language.

I began my career as a social worker in a Parent Child Center in Jerusalem. I worked primarily with parents, and the most important lesson I learned was that most of them don’t want to hurt their children — they were raised the same way and simply don’t know anything else. They need help to develop better coping and communication skills. I’ve also learned you can’t help a child without helping their parents. I was shocked to find out nearly every child, even those who suffer from severe abuse, wishes to be with their parents. That changed my world and shaped my professional understanding forever about the importance of the family unit and how to help the parents, for the children’s sake.

Since I came to Tulsa, I've seen differences and similarities in our countries' child welfare systems. This comparative perspective helps me understand the training needs of professionals here and about the nature of this complex social phenomena. Child maltreatment is a worldwide problem, but social and cultural contexts influence it in many ways. For example, in Oklahoma, most children removed from homes are placed in foster care families; in Israel, most children are placed in residential care facilities. After the Holocaust, thousands of orphaned children came to Israel without any family. The very young Israel needed to find a solution, so it established residential care facilities. As the system developed, it became a good solution for children who needed to be removed from their homes. This exchange program gives us all an opportunity to learn from each other.

I've had the opportunity to accomplish many things while here. We've hosted a series of international speakers who gave free public lectures to local professionals, and in April, Haruv USA hosted its Inaugural Summit on Child Abuse and Neglect. Four hundred professionals from Oklahoma heard international experts present on a myriad of issues affecting at-risk children.

The excellent professionals here are doing everything possible to prevent and reduce child maltreatment, but they can't do it alone. They need public support, resources, legislation, and a community that puts children as a top priority. Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a community to make sure children are safe and can experience a good, happy childhood. This is not a mission of the professionals alone, it is a mission for the human race.

On a personal note, it is extremely bittersweet to leave Tulsa to go home. We had such a special time here and we are so thankful we got to travel all over this beautiful country. My two daughters now speak fluent English and will miss their school and friends deeply, but will get to stay in touch with them thanks to technology. We will carry our wonderful memories with us back to Israel and are so thankful to have been part of Tulsa.

Haruv USA will continue its great work here in Tulsa as the new director from Israel embarks on her journey in August. This purposeful rotation allows us to continue to share our collective knowledge and experience, furthering our

profession and our worldwide work dedicated to the prevention and treatment of abused and neglected children.

Avital Friedman was the inaugural director of Haruv USA at OU-Tulsa.