

Highland Park girl has high-tech time in Israel

by Abigail Klein Leichman, Special to NJJN August 18, 2009

If Danielle Benesch was feeling a bit homesick during her first few days at overnight camp, she simply Skyped her parents in New Jersey, 6,000 miles away.

At eCamp, based at a youth village near Haifa, Skype was actually one of the more low-tech amenities available to 11-year-old Danielle of Highland Park and nearly 100 other campers from Israel, Europe, and the United States.

Digital music composition, flash animation, PC building, robotics, and video editing were among the new skills they learned — while enjoying exposure to a variety of cultures in an Israeli environment.

Danielle, the only camper from New Jersey, is a budding website designer who taught herself HTML. She and her parents, Hanna and Andy, discovered eCamp — where else? — on-line.

“People are looking for fresh, unique, and more sophisticated camp options,” said Dotan Tamir, the two-year-old camp’s 26-year-old founder.

After working at computer day camps in Israel and overnight ones in America, Tamir had a novel notion to create a sleep-away program for Israeli and overseas eight- to 18-year-olds that would combine elements of the two approaches.

“We want to show Israel to international kids from a whole new point of view,” said Tamir. “At the computer camp in America, the only goal was [acquiring] skills. Here, an additional goal is to make friends from all over the world and see Israel as a place that is not only war and politics and religion, but also high-tech and innovation.”

Hanna Benesch said they did not hesitate to send their daughter. “We were fine with it because I have a mother and a sister who live in Tel Aviv,” she said by phone from back in the States. “Danielle was there with family before and after camp. But there are no kids her age among my relatives, so we’re happy that she’s interacting a lot with Israelis at camp.”

The Highland Park Middle School sixth-grader said she’s discovered that “Israelis are more down to earth. They stop to say hi even if they barely know you.” She roomed with two Israeli girls and one “from a country called Latvia, which I’d never heard of. She speaks Russian.”

Danielle attended workshops in digital music, dynamic website design, and casual game production. “I like my casual game production workshop because it’s the easiest to use and I knew nothing about it when I started,” she said. “What I love most is that the counselor gave us the free version to install at home. Most of my counselors gave us something to bring home. I can’t wait to use this stuff.”

Tamir said 60 percent of the participants in the first session, which ended July 26, were Israeli. The remaining 40 percent were split between Americans and Europeans from such countries as France, Spain, and Holland. The program’s common language was English.

“English is the unofficial international language and most kids learn it in school,” Tamir explained. “But the real international language here is technology. The kids like the same websites, the same games, the same gadgets. That’s their common denominator even if they don’t understand each other with words.”

About 30 percent of the campers were female. “We’re really trying to get more girls involved with technology,” said Tamir.

eCamp’s schedule for each of two 12-day sessions included sports, swimming, outdoor games, and field trips. Some groups visited Google Israel, others went to see a robot produced for Israel’s First Robotics Competition, and Danielle’s age group manufactured their own 3D puzzles at a plastics factory.

Oranim Educational Initiatives provided Tamir with the financial and logistical resources to bring his camp to fruition. But the legwork was all his.

“I served in the [Israeli army’s] intelligence operational technology unit for three years and learned a lot about computers — and also about dealing with demanding situations,” he said. Two of the camp’s 17 staffers served with him in the same unit.

Along with assistant director Liraz Sharabani, Tamir did two marketing tours in America earlier this year.

“I met Danielle’s mother at a camp fair,” he said. “We also gave presentations at Hebrew schools in New Jersey on Israeli high-tech innovations and they were amazed to find out that things like cell phones and CPUs were invented here.”

During the second session, 20 American and 20 Israeli children are attending eCamp as part of Mifgash, a summer program uniting the Partnership 2000 cities of Philadelphia and Netivot.

That sort of integration is key to Dotan’s dream.

“Kids like Danielle can be the next leaders of technology companies,” said Dotan. “And now she has so many new friends from Israel. Together they might create the next Google or Microsoft, and that can one day help Israel.”

For Danielle, the benefits are more immediate. “I’ll be taking knowledge home from the projects and the programs,” she said, “but I’m also taking home a whole new outlook after having three roommates from other countries.”