

# HAPPY MOMENTS FOR SICK CHILDREN

Dedicated to providing support for children with cancer and their families, Larger than Life organizes special activities and helps to fund some of the inevitable expenses of caring for a sick child / Natalie Page

At the age of fifteen and a half, Avishai Bibi from Jerusalem was looking forward to spending his summer vacation with his friends when, on the second day of the vacation, he was diagnosed with Burkitt lymphoma, an aggressive cancer that attacked his stomach, kidneys and liver. He spent the next year in the hospital undergoing a rigorous regime of cancer treatments. This meant relentless fatigue and pain, constantly being afraid that his immune system cell counts will go down, which would mean that his body is more susceptible to infection, and running to the hospital every time his body temperature rises.

“At the beginning, he did not leave the hospital for four months, and he was subsequently hospitalized many times,” his mother Dafna Bibi tells of Avishai’s one and a half year ordeal on the way to recovery. “As a mother, you want to protect your child, and the knowledge that his suffering is out of your control and that you don’t know what lies ahead is unbearable,” she says. During the entire period, Dafna stayed at her son’s bedside, meaning that the family’s income was significantly reduced. Avishai’s experiences are similar to those of another 400 children diagnosed with cancer every year.

One day while in the hospital with Avishai, a representative of Larger than Life (“Gdolim MeHaHaim”) approached Dafna, suggesting that her son join them for a once-in-a-lifetime trip to the West Coast of the United States once he finishes his chemotherapy treatment. “At first, I didn’t think that a child in his condition would be able to go, for he had lost 17 kilos, and was all skin and bones,” says Dafna. “As the date of departure grew near, Avishai got more excited and it gave him the strength he needed to fight the cancer. When Avishai came back, he was a changed boy, filled with joy and a lust for life.”

Thanks to Larger than Life and the Larger than Life family in Los Angeles, Avishai spent two magical weeks in Los Angeles, San Diego and Las Vegas, enjoying all that these cities



have to offer: Universal Studios, Six Flags, the Hollywood Walk of Fame, Disneyland, Sea World and many other attractions.

## Giving hope

Every year Larger than Life takes care of around 1,500 children and their families. “We try to take the kids at the hardest point of their battle and give them and their families hope and a lot of happiness,” explains Larger than Life CEO Lior Shmueli. “The idea is that a child who is happy and who is filled with hope is best suited to fight and overcome cancer. I know how parents panic when their child has the flu, so imagine what it means to have a child in the hospital undergoing treatment for an entire year; a period filled with emotional and financial pressure and complete devotion to the sick child.”

A child with cancer is typically subjected to a very long period of treatment in the hospital. The shortest case scenario is six months of confinement, while the average is a year to a year and a half with daily treatments, and it can last for as long as four years - and sometimes throughout life. Describing the difficulties encountered by the families, Shmueli notes that “over 50 percent of parents lose their work place because of the need to be with the child during the treatments, and all the parents stay with the kids while hospitalized, which means that for an entire year they sleep on the hospital couch. And then there is the need to provide the child with organic

food, various food additives and vitamins and many supplementary medical treatments not covered by the Ministry of Health.”

This is where Larger than Life is trying to make a difference. “We provide mental, emotional and social support for the children with cancer and their families,” says Shmueli. “We also work to improve the quality of medical treatments in the hospitals. In addition, we are trying to improve the quality of medical treatment offered by lobbying the Ministry of Health to increase the number of cancer drugs and treatments that are funded by the Government.”

The organization relies solely on donations for its operation, and offers its services to all children with cancer regardless of race, gender and religion.

A special fund to help families cover costs of medication and medical aides not funded by the Government allocates up to \$5,000 per child. A one-week vacation in Eilat for a sick child and his family costs \$1,000 per family, and a Dream Trip to Orlando or Los Angeles costs \$3,500 per child.

Larger than Life is organizing a fund-raising gala on October 31st in Tel Aviv, during which talented children with cancer will sing duets with their favorite singers. Many of Israel’s leading performers have volunteered to participate in the event.

## A break from the hospital

Another way the organization helps chil-



Little girls at Larger than Life's annual Purim party

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Children with cancer and their families is through one-week Larger than Life summer camps in northern Israel. Around 100 Arab and Jewish kids from all over Israel, aged 9-18, and their siblings participate in this full-board camp.

After starting the day with "laughter yoga," the children go on to enjoy challenging sports, support groups, arts and sports therapy, paragliding, helicopter and jeep rides, field and kayak trips, dancing and performances. "The summer camp affords the kids the opportunity to spend one week in nature, far away from the hospital's fluorescent lighting, hospital beds, infusions, injections and pain," explains Shmueli. "It is heartwarming to see how by the second day the kids remove their wigs and hats, and walk around comfortably with a bald head, because they feel that they are accepted the way they are," says Shmueli. It also provides them with the opportunity to make friends with children who are going through the same ordeal.

Another annual activity is the Purim Smile Train in which 1,200 children and their families come aboard a special round-trip Haifa-to-Beersheva carnival train, courtesy of Israel Railways and Mirs. Bald and cheerful fairies and Queen Esthers can be found in the train's cars interacting with clowns, make-up artists, performers and many other volunteers. Upon arrival in Beersheva, a festive Purim party comprising songs, dances and performances by artists awaits the dressed-up travelers. The activity is designed mainly for the younger kids, up to the age of 13. "I don't believe that there is a happier and bigger Purim festival anywhere else in Israel," remarks Shmueli.

Parents of children with cancer often find

themselves torn between staying with the sick child in the hospital, going to work and taking care of the other siblings. Wishing to give the families the opportunity to be a "regular family" once more, every year Larger than Life sends 150 children with cancer and their families on a fully-funded four-day get-away vacation to Eilat. With activities such as sailing on a yacht, swimming with dolphins and a trip to the desert, the family gets to reunite and spend some quality time together, enjoying the fresh, non-hospital air and, most importantly, receiving a fresh infusion of zest for life.

### A trip of a lifetime

Larger than Life organizes two trips every year for groups of 25-30 children aged 10-18, one to Orlando and Miami and the other to Los Angeles. "We take the children in the midst of a difficult ordeal and instill in them the hope that if they get through the treatments they will find themselves on a plane on the way to Disneyworld or Disneyland," explains Shmueli. "This knowledge gives them the willpower they need to get through the treatments; that with every day that passes they draw nearer to their dream vacation. Some of the children fly to the US knowing that when they come back they will undergo surgery that may leave them in a wheelchair for life; some are between treatments and their doctor phones us saying that if they don't take part in the trip they will have to be treated for depression.

The trip is not easy, but no child would refuse a day in Disneyland, Sea World or Universal Studios, and it is because of the dif-

ficult nature of the journey that they get the strength they need for the struggle that still awaits them. We walk the very fine line between the pain, sadness, chemotherapy and boldness that are an integral part of cancer treatments and the fun-filled activities that we offer," says Shmueli.

### Direct assistance for families

A very important target audience for Larger than Life's activities is the mothers of children with cancer. "Because we know that the mother is the one who is holding the family together and carrying the burden of taking care of the sick child and the other siblings, we have organized support groups for these mothers, which operate throughout the year," says Shmueli. There is also a special support group for bereaved mothers.

"The most important and life saving activity that we are involved in, which takes up 30 percent of our budget, is to directly assist families by funding medication, medical equipment and treatments that are not covered by the health maintenance organizations. "We help families buy medication that is not funded by the Ministry of Health, fund innovative treatments and surgical procedures in Israel and abroad which are not funded by the health maintenance organization, purchase wigs and wheelchairs, and pay for dental treatments. We try to ensure that a family will not have to mortgage their house in order to pay for their child's treatment," notes Shmueli.

"We are not doctors, and we don't have the ability to physically influence the children's medical treatment, but we know that we can make their difficult journey easier, give them the strength to get through another day and, most importantly, make them smile with joy," concludes Shmueli. ■

For more information about Larger than Life, please go to [www.gdolim.org.il](http://www.gdolim.org.il), Tel. +972-3-6195977. In the US, call: 1-800-4460404 or 1-818-8877640.