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Youth 'Ambassadors' Spell Out Just What Life's Like in Sederot

April 24, 2008 - [Michelle Mostovy-Eisenberg](#), Staff Writer

Can you imagine having to go every day, out of necessity, to a place where you don't feel safe, a place that, traditionally, should be one of comfort and security?

For Israeli teenager Elan Siegel, that is part of her daily routine, since she attends high school in Sederot.

"School is more a danger than my home," relayed the 17-year-old junior to a group of local students last Wednesday. Since her kibbutz, Kfar Aza, is so close to the border with Gaza, "the rockets go over my home," she explained, using hand gestures to show the arch the rockets take over her house. Her school, however, can sometimes be right in the line of fire.

"It is hard to keep going and have a regular routine," she added, "but we try to do the best we can."

Siegel was among a small delegation of youth ambassadors from the southern Israeli region who visited the United States for five days last week in an effort to put a human face to the terror being inflicted on that part of the Negev.

The four young Israelis were part of a student cultural exchange program organized by the American-Israel Friendship League, a nonprofit organization that works to strengthen the ties between the two countries based on their common values.

Joining Siegel as the league's Dr. Charlotte K. Frank Fellows were her classmate, Hanna Dana Gat, 16, as well as Yamit Cohen, 24, and Ariel Tamir, 30, students at Sapir Academic College, the largest public college in Israel, which is located in Sederot. Siegel and Dana Gat's teacher at Shaar Ha Negev High School, Jacqueline Duenias, accompanied the group.

Most of their April 13-17 visit was spent in New York, where the ambassadors talked to high-school students and media representatives about their harrowing daily life, but they



The Sederot delegation was greeted upon arrival at 30th Street Station by Israeli Consul Leo Vinovezky (second from left, back row) of the Consulate General of Israel in Philadelphia.

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took time to travel down to the Philadelphia area so they could speak with two groups of students at the Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy in Merion Station.

The Israelis were treated to a pizza lunch at Barrack. While they ate, teacher Ray Leven told them, in Hebrew, about the school. They then met with 20 or so 11th-graders in the library, sharing their personal stories before answering questions from Barrack students and faculty. The youth ambassadors later spoke in Hebrew to members of a 10th-grade class.

For more than seven years, hundreds of both rocket and mortar attacks have been aimed from the Gaza Strip into neighboring Israeli communities; and their intensity and frequency have only escalated since Hamas took over the strip in 2004. For many western Negev youths like Siegel and Dana Gat, it is perhaps the only sort of life they've ever known.

Daily routines become interrupted when the "Tzeva Adom" ("Code Red") emanates from loudspeakers, explained Tamir, signifying that they have 10 to 15 seconds to find shelter from the missile attack. It's then, he noted, that "you hope nothing is going to fall on your head."

"The school and community are constantly under missile attack," stated Tamir. "We've lived under daily attack for such a long time."

'It Gets Really Scary'

On some days, the warning goes off two or three times; other days, it's sounded dozens of times, he said. "It gets really scary" to hang out in the street. Everyone agreed that the attacks have taken a psychological toll on the young and their elders.

Dana Gat said that, despite the rocket attacks, she doesn't want her family to move from the only home she's known over the past 10 years.

Duenias, who teaches geography and Tanach at Shaar Ha Negev, said that there are about 900 students, in seventh through 12th grades, at her school; there used to be more students, she added, but they have moved elsewhere with their families.

"I chose to live there," said Duenias, echoing the sentiments of Dana Gat. "I bought my house there. I live there ... it's Israel. We have to stay."

The delegation mentioned that they'd heard on the news that, earlier that day, several rockets had fallen in Sederot, including a Kassam that landed in Kibbutz Nir-Am, where Dana Gat lives. Luckily, there was no damage, and no one was wounded.

After leaving Barrack, the group paid a visit to South Street for some down time during their Philadelphia sojourn. William H. Behrer, III, chief operating officer of the AIFL, who accompanied the group throughout their stay on the East Coast, said that, later in the evening, the students hoped to do their best Rocky Balboa imitations on the Philadelphia Museum of Art steps and perhaps see some other sites before heading back to New York, giving them a few more hours of fun away from the rockets and the stress.

"When those buzzers go off, they never know where it will land in 10 seconds," he added. "Twenty-four hours a day -- that's what they live under."

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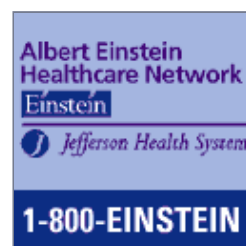
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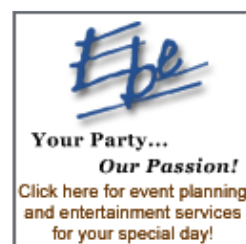
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