

SDEROT

Shabbat greetings to everyone, I feel that the Friday night message is a great idea by the community and hopefully it will continue beyond this time of craziness.

I have recently started a new project myself which is reconnecting with friends who I haven't spoken to for a while, there is nothing as nice as getting a message from someone who we haven't heard from in ages, especially during these difficult days. So I have started to contact someone every week just to wish them Shabbat Shalom and check in with them.

One of those who I have recently reconnected with was a dear friend Stewart Ganullin who happens to be the CEO of an organisation who I volunteered with on my many trips to Israel. Stewart is the amazing head of Hope for Sderot based in what is sadly known as the rocket capital of the world. The small "museum" of Kassam, Grad and Kadyusha rockets in the cities police station is a reminder of the over 16000 rockets to be fired from the nearby Gaza Strip to the civilian population 2km away in Sderot.



The "rocket museum" located at Sderot police station.

In the year preceding, to the year following, the Gush Katif disengagement rocket attacks on Sderot and surrounding Western Negev increased by ten-fold. Even though those who could afford to flee reducing the city population to less than 20000 it was allowed to retain city status and at the last year's census had risen to almost 28000. During the Second Intifada, the city became a target for rockets from the Gaza Strip, starting in 2001. Rocket fire intensified after the Israeli disengagement from Gaza in 2005. The population declined as families left the city in desperation.

History of Sderot

Sderot was originally founded in 1951 as a transit camp called Gabim Dorot for Israeli immigrants, primarily from Kurdistan and Iran. The town was renamed Sderot in 1954 after the Eucalyptus boulevard planted along the length of the town, whose planting provided employment to the residents of the settlement. This still exists today boosted by the huge JNF Boulevard entrance arch. Sderot received a symbolic name, after the numerous avenues and standalone rows of trees planted in the Negev, especially

between Beersheba and Gaza, to combat desertification and beautify the arid landscape. Like many other localities in the Negev, Sderot's name has a green motif that symbolizes the motto "making the desert bloom", a central part of Zionist ideology.

The second big wave of Aliyah in Sderot was when it absorbed a large wave of immigrants from the former Soviet Union during post-Soviet 1990s and also took in immigrants from Ethiopia during this time. Its population doubled as a result. In 1996, it was declared a city.

The most famous mayor is Alon Davidi who is in his second term and has been the major driving force in the policy to have a bomb proof room or MAMAD in every home in Sderot (incidentally where many families sleep). This policy has seen Sderot grow in recent years despite the ongoing threat of Kassams and on every return visit I am delighted to report the increased house building, a brand new super park courtesy of JNF and the maintaining of industries such as Nestle and Osem as well as more being attracted to the region in spite of a danger of a daily barrage of rockets and mortars.

One of the last engagements I had before leaving Belfast, for two years in Israel, was to be asked by NIFI to speak alongside the then mayor of Sderot David Bouskilla at a conference. I had just returned from a month-long trip to Israel of which the majority was spent in Sderot volunteering during the 2014 Operation Protective Edge when the city suffered one of its most concentrated barrage of missiles. I could see that the audience was visibly moved by the plight of Sderotians even taking into account our own history of violence in Northern Ireland. My favourite point of the presentation was when I was able to point out to Mayor Bouskilla that the Hope for Sderot office was just under the window of his mayoral office in Sderot. True to his word he visited the HFS office and helped them with future projects.



The entrance sign of Sderot boulevard financed by the JNF-UK

Hope for Sderot

Hope for Sderot was formed as a humanitarian organisation back in 2008 to help the people of Sderot who have suffered from 20 years of rocket attacks from Gaza terror groups. Most who could afford have left and those who have stayed put whether by choice or by having no alternative have suffered years of mental and physical trauma. I personally think that this is not PTSD but rather Accumulative Traumatic Stress Disorder and the effects will last a lifetime.



Stewart inspects the infamous bomb proof caterpillar play park in Sderot.

The organisation has a mission of helping all those affected by the Kassams by supplying food, clothing, financial aid, educational scholarships and many simple personal but much needed projects. This is done through dignity, respect and unconditional love.

Every child born since 2001 has been raised in the arena of terror and haunted by the Tseva Adom (Red Alert) alarm which gives them just 15 seconds to reach a bomb proof shelter either day or night. In actual fact these terrorists will even deliberately target times when kids are going to or from school or synagogues.

The organisation is non-profit and with a totally volunteer staff. I have been lucky to meet many of the residents helped by Hope for Sderot and worked on projects such as Kobi's pergola, packing and delivering food parcels, school summer schemes and refurbishments and simple tasks which can improve life quality of everyone in the city.

My first encounter with Stewart and HFS was Channukah 2011 when after researching humanitarian groups operating in Sderot I connected with his organisation. Within an hour of meeting him, his infectious energy and talent for almost anything, had me helping out at a children's and adults' Channukah party and ended up staying in his home on many occasions while volunteering on every visit to Israel since then. Stewart married Eti a lifelong Sderotian and they live a stones throw from the new play park built by JNF and straddled by conveniently positioned bomb shelters. We worked on many projects since then and I met many of the bravest residents of Sderot, unbroken and unbowed despite years of terror.

In July 2014, as we made our way to the local school Hamas launched a barrage of rockets. We abandoned car and ran to the nearest shelter and were joined by 3 healthcare workers and a number of Arab builders (who has chosen an inopportune moment to work on a roof!). Five times we tried to leave but there was a salvo which forced us back inside, this was a strategy by Hamas to try and beat the Iron Dome battery situated in the fields behind Sderot Football Club. The last one struck a nearby house and miraculously the gas pipe didn't ignite. We left and proceeded to the school which was in concrete blast wall protected building. The highlight later that day was the

nearby Ben and Jerrys factory bringing us an endless supply of ice cream to the school and from that day I have had a soft spot for the product!!



The school I volunteered in. Protected by blast walls, bomb shelters and on the right you can see the strike marks from a previous Kassam which miraculously exploded just before the children arrived



Althea looks on at the fortifications of an Equivalent school in Sderot.



Kacey and Althea enjoy the amazing state of the art park in Sderot with adjacent bomb shelters.

It was special to speak again with Stewart and to reminisce about all the special memories.

Most of us will not have the pleasure to help these wonderful people or to be humbled by being able to do some small act of kindness to touch their hearts and show that people do care. One thing I always think of when I hear people talking about social distancing, just how do you social distance when in a bomb shelter and what child do you chose to lift first when the Tseva Adom alarm goes off.

As we enter our Shabbat all I ask is to take a small moment to think of the residents of Sderot, and perhaps check out one of the links below but really just give thanks that even though we are in an incredibly testing time we don't have to face the trauma of a 15 second run to a bomb shelter. Why not scroll through our phonebook list and catch up with someone we haven't heard from in a while!!

Wishing you and your families an amazing and peaceful Shabbat!!

Stephen, Gie, Kacey and Althea Haire
Norwich Liberal Jewish Community
norwichljc.org.uk



Links

The work of Hope for Sderot
<https://www.hopeforsderot.com/>

Rocket City
https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=https%3A%2F%2Fyoutu.be%2FbekzphyKR14

How the children of Sderot deal with Tseva Adom
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SoB1AjVCueU&feature=youtu.be>

Sderot Media 15 seconds in Sderot
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6iPZNo7M7g&feature=youtu.be>

A nice song which always makes me think of our own Chaim of Cromer (Dr Philip)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sR_OibUmuL8