

Mission to Israel a HUGE Success



The entire group at the Western Wall in Jerusalem

After 1 year of planning, an incredible journey took place from November 13-22, 2011 as 8 Residents of The Jewish Home and 3 people from Hollander House travelled together with clinical and support staff to Israel.

“It was unbelievable how great everyone was on the trip,” said Andrew H. Banoff, President & CEO of The Jewish Home. “Not one individual missed a single activity! We had a magnificent time and are all very grateful to the private donors who financed the entire trip.”

Among the travelers from The Jewish Home were a loving brother and sister, a Holocaust survivor, and a woman who had organized many trips to Israel for members of the community as part.

“I so enjoyed seeing the changes and improvements since I was in Israel in the seventies,” said Selma Rosenblatt, President of the Residents Council at the Home. “Back then I worked for the Bridgeport Jewish Federation leading trips there to raise money for Israel. This time all of us got to see how amazing a country Israel has become.”

The Hollander House guests included a woman whose husband had lived at The Jewish Home and a married couple who emigrated from the former Soviet Union a number of years ago.

After arriving in Israel, the group went north to the Galilee, the Golan Heights, and the Sea of Galilee. The remaining five days were spent in and around Jerusalem.

“There were so many highlights residents have difficulty picking their favorites,” said Rabbi Stephen Shulman, Director Pastoral Services. “The list would certainly include being at the Western Wall, the Sea of Galilee, the Dead Sea and Masada, plus enjoying the views from the Golan Heights, and taking a hike through the Tel Dan Nature Reserve.”

The average age of the residents was 91 and they were on the go from early morning until late evening. To meet the particular needs of this age group Ellen Ashkins, Director of Resident Life at the Home, worked tirelessly to arrange the necessary medical equipment, and appropriate accommodations for every aspect of the itinerary. Ashkins personally took many residents to the Department of Motor Vehicles for photo ID's and completed reams of paperwork to be sure everyone had a valid passport.

“I have been to Israel before but never like this,” said Ashkins. “Experiencing Israel through the residents’ eyes gave me an entirely new perspective on each monument, museum and mountain. Every bit of challenge planning the trip was worth it when I saw the expressions on their faces as they tasted new foods, met people from around the world, and stood at places they had read about.”

Adding a very special dimension to this journey was the involvement of family members. Regine Arouete, a resident of the Home, was delighted her son, Marc, came from Belgium to join her for a few days. Former Jewish Home employees Stephen Rubin and Miriam Duskis visited the group. Mor Goshen, who had visited the Home weekly as an Israeli Emissary in 2006, and her family spent Shabbat with the group. Visits from Banoff's relatives and other group members' truly enhanced the experience for everyone.

Perhaps the best family gathering was saved for last. On the final day of the trip, surrounded by their parents and the loving support of these special travelers, at the Begin Center in Jerusalem, the granddaughters of Jewish Home resident Leslie Novis became Bat Mitzvah marking their change of status from childhood into adulthood.

Although the weather did not cooperate during the trip, nothing stopped this incredible group from experiencing every aspect of Israeli life. They toured Yemin Orde, a Youth Center, and Yad LaKashish, “Lifeline for the Old”, where elderly artisans create beautiful and practical objects.

“The Emunotes from Afula, the sister community of Bridgeport, entertained us one evening and got everyone up and dancing!” said Banoff. “Everywhere we went people were quite taken by the group and eagerly engaged in conversation to understand the importance of living and enjoying life. The Jewish Home staff was truly remarkable with our group, and managed every detail of the trip. The only time, day or night, they were not with the residents was for a tour of the Christian Quarter and a shopping break on Sunday.”

The group posted videos on Facebook, shown daily on a large screen in the Home. Photos were printed and prominently displayed. By going to “The Jewish Home of Fairfield County” Facebook page everyone can have the joy of sharing this journey.

“To learn more about our trip I invite you to come meet these incredible adventurers because they would love to tell you their stories,” said Banoff. “In addition, from the planning stage to our return home, two very talented videographers captured the memories. In the coming months, we will create a movie to share with the world so everyone can be inspired by our journey.”

