

Propping up the poverty-stricken at Tenufa Bakehila

• By JOSH HASTEN

The best way to describe the scene in an upper floor apartment within the low-income Ramat Polin section on a recent Monday morning was one of controlled chaos.

Handymen and painters were bustling from room to room working on repairs while taking orders from the project manager. Alongside them were volunteers from Israel and abroad who dived right in, schlepping materials, fixing kitchen cabinets, and overall just offering a hand where needed.

On the surface, it might have seemed like any other home-improvement project, but this renovation was anything but typical.

That's because the work being carried out to benefit the apartment's inhabitants, a couple and their seven children, was all being done pro bono by Tenufa Bakehila, a nonprofit group dedicated to improving the lives of poverty-stricken families.

Each year the organization provides emergency home repairs for more than 250 families in eight cities throughout the country. Those in need include the elderly, Holocaust survivors, physically or mentally disabled individuals, single parents and other at-risk populations.

Gabi Nachmani is Tenufa Bakehila's founder and director. He started the organization in 1993, as a project under the auspices of the Livnot U'Lehibanot organization. Realizing that the demand was great, Nachmani decided to expand the concept as its own entity.

He says that he was inspired to start the organization from his own childhood memories of growing up in a dilapidated Jerusalem apartment and being embarrassed to bring his friends home.

As an adult he decided that something had to be done to help those living in substandard living conditions as a result of poverty – not only in Jerusalem, but all over the country.

Nachmani explains to *In Jerusalem* how it all works.

"The Jerusalem Municipal Welfare Department – or the municipal welfare department in each respective city that the group operates in – knows us well. They compile lists of families [whose private homes are in need of repair] and fax them to us. We then prioritize the list based on the severity of the request, putting the most serious emergency situations at the top. I give the list to Yaron Arad, our Jerusalem branch project manager, who pays a visit to the family, along with our social worker, and determines the extent of the physical needs of the home, while the social worker documents the needs of the family."

In the case of the Ramot apartment, Arad explains that "the welfare department informed us that the family has a



Easing the burden: Each year the organization provides emergency home repairs to more than 250 families in eight Israeli cities. (Photos: Courtesy)

child with psychological issues who apparently went on a rampage and destroyed things in the house – door handles, window handles, and other items."

When Arad arrived to assess, he saw that the situation was worse than anticipated. The family's needs went well beyond the damage caused by the child.

The ceiling in one of the children's bedrooms had sustained severe water damage, and was covered in mold and rapidly deteriorating. There was water damage in other areas of the house. The kitchen cabinets were collapsing. Numerous other repairs were necessary pro bono as well.

So on that Monday morning, Arad, along with a Tenufa handyman and a group of volunteers, arrived at the apartment to start working on the repairs, thus demonstrating the organization's modus operandi in real time. Arad says, "The children's bedroom was the top priority, so we started there."

At the same time, Avigail Strenger, Tenufa's social worker, was sitting at the dining room table with the apartment's tenants, Mr. and Mrs. B. (name withheld), to assess how she could help them and their children.

FOLLOWING HER conversation with the parents, Strenger explains, "If I am there [inside a home], there are certainly other issues [in addition to just the need of home repairs]."

Sure enough, she says that in this specific situation the father earns a low wage working part-time as an educator in a local school, while the mother, who has experience as a hairdresser, is currently unemployed.

In addition to the child with psychological issues, who for now is in the care

of relatives, the family's oldest daughter has just gotten a divorce and has a small child.

Strenger says her first priority is to put together a life plan to get the family back on track, with an initial focus on helping to secure steady employment for working-age family members.

She gives an example of how she is helping a another family: a divorced mother in Neveh Ya'acov with nine children, the oldest of whom is an unemployed single mother living at home.

"I was able to get the daughter into an employment training program," she says, and she hopes to get the mother into the program as well.

In addition, Strenger says that the family was in dire straits after having built up an enormous debt with Hagihon Co. Ltd. – Jerusalem's water and wastewater utility.

However, after examining the paperwork, she was able to help ease that burden, determining that this woman's ex-husband was responsible for half of the payments.

She says that by helping to reduce the water bill by half and encouraging the mother to insist that her older children find work and contribute towards the family's budget, there was a domino effect for the positive, with things starting to move in the right direction.

"Resolving that Hagihon situation literally got this woman moving," she says.

"It's all about seeing what the family's needs are and empowering them to move forward," Strenger explains, sharing an intervention approach that enables her to help impoverished families living in some of the most unimaginable conditions.

WALKING INTO the family living room from one of the apartment bedrooms,

wearing a bright orange T-shirt with the Tenufa logo, is Gary Goldman, a New York City attorney. Goldman says he flew to Israel specifically to dedicate a week of his time to volunteer for the organization. While admitting that he isn't very handy and he is mostly "schlepping" alongside the other qualified repairmen, he says he is doing what he can to help.

"They [Tenufa] are doing God's work, and I just wanted to show these people [in need] that they are not alone. I felt compelled to come here and give of my time." Goldman says that one day he hope to make aliya and live in Israel on a full-time basis.

Hershey Spaeth, another volunteer, is busy repairing kitchen cabinets. While he now lives in Israel with his family, having made aliya from New York a few years ago, he speaks with equal passion about the cause.

Spaeth says that in New York he worked in construction, and decided he wanted "to use my old skills to help." He says that he now works at his regular job at night and is happy volunteering since he can "see the fruits of my labor. I don't get that at my desk job."

Nachmani explains that the organization gets calls on a regular basis from volunteers wanting to help with the home repairs.

He says that local businesses are often willing to get involved, and he gives them the opportunity by allowing them to send as many as 10 volunteers to work on specific daylong projects. Often the companies "sponsor" part of their own work, helping to subsidize the costs of the repairs that they themselves are fixing.

Volunteers are important, Nachmani says, as are donations. The organization

does not receive government assistance and depends 100% on the generosity from supporters in the US, throughout Europe, Australia and Israel.

Due to financial constraints, he says that while Tenufa these days receives more than 700 referrals for help yearly, its maximum reach is currently around 250 homes. He is proud that since the organization's founding in 1993, they have touched the lives of more than 3,800 families.

As the repairs are being done, Mr. and Mrs. B. are moving around their apartment, trying not to get in the way, and are offering tea to those who came to help.

A new and functioning handle has been attached to the living room window and Mrs. B. is grateful. "It was very cold in here, as the window would not close," she says.

Mr. B. also expresses his gratitude.

"We've been living here for 15 years already, and I don't think things have been fixed or replaced since the Six Day War," he says half-sarcastically.

"The children were excited about the repairs and they wanted to stay home from school to see the changes, but we made them go. I'm truly grateful we are getting this help."

Nachmani says he has seen a lot in his role over the years – from a Holocaust survivor whose apartment was flooded with 30 centimeters of water forcing him to raise his bed onto cinder blocks before Tenufa stepped in, to a man whose water pipes were so clogged that he couldn't shower at home for months.

The needs of this population are what got him involved in the first place.

"Helping these people, it is a passion of mine."