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Camp Sababa campers and staffers come together in March to celebrate the camp's 10th anniversary.

## Helping cure external, internal scars

Local lawyer runs camps for burn victims, here and in Israel, and contributes to research

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**I**t is not easy to look at the scars of a child burn survivor.

Teaneck-based attorney Sam Davis has seen hundreds of such children since he founded the not-for-profit Burn Advocates Network as a philanthropic outgrowth of his experience helping clients whose lives were devastated by burn injuries.

When he looks at children attending the many burn camps in the United States to which BAN has provided volunteers, adaptive musical instruments, and recreational equipment over the years, he sees their pain but he also sees tangible ways to help.

Help can be as simple as providing Strumstick string instruments, which children who are missing fingers or hands can play with an adaptive pick, or as complicated as finding the funds and personnel to start ambitious new programs.

Years ago, BAN arranged to fly a few Israeli children to a Pennsylvania burn camp after Mr. Davis learned that Israel did not have a program similar to America's dozens of burn camps where young survivors enjoy several days healing, fellowship, and fun. In fact, no Middle Eastern country had such a camp.

To benefit more Israeli children, BAN

teamed with physical therapist Marcia Levinson, the director of Camp Susquehanna in Pennsylvania, to establish such a camp in northern Israel.

This March marked the 10th annual session of the Israel Burn Camp for Children, nicknamed Camp Sababa for the Arabic-Hebrew slang word for "cool" or "great."

Staffed mainly by occupational and physical therapists and social workers from Schneider Children's Medical Center as well as by volunteers from other Israeli hospitals, for the last four years Camp Sababa has been based in Kfar Galim youth village south of Haifa.

The beachside location affords the opportunity for campers, who range in age from 6 to 17, to go surfing and swimming in the Mediterranean, their tender skin protected from the sun by full wetsuits.

"There were close to 50 burn survivors at our 10th session, held as it always is the week before Passover," Mr. Davis said. "Parents and siblings coming to the camp's 10th anniversary celebration showered us with an outpouring of gratitude, in Hebrew and Arabic, about how the camp has helped their children."

He says the program provides a "totally harmonious" space where all campers get along beautifully. "Many cross-cultural friendships have developed. 'Sababa'

emphasizes the commonality of their need to have fun and just be kids."

For the first time this year, Camp Sababa had former campers returning as counselors in training. "As role models they demonstrate that even kids with terrible burn scars can live joyful and productive lives," said Mr. Davis, a Bergen County native who belongs to Temple Sinai in Tenafly.

"Some of our proudest moments are when alumni, who when we first saw them were just closed shells, come back to camp wearing an army uniform. In Israel, when you join the army that means you're mainstream. They truly transformed from burn victims to burn survivors."

Mr. Davis said the camp is now becoming part of the standard for burn care in the Israeli medical system. "There is an acknowledgement that we have to do something about the kids' spirits and psychological state. That can only happen outside the hospital setting."

Based on the success of Camp Sababa, last year BAN partnered with the Brazil Burn Society to open Camp Samba outside Sao Paulo, the first burn camp in Brazil. "We had about 40 kids. We anticipate that it will be a yearly camp going forward," said Mr. Davis.

Camp Sababa also inspired a camp in India. "Five years ago, we brought three

Indian burn surgeons to Camp Sababa to see what we do," Mr. Davis said. "Following this training they started Camp Karma in Mumbai, and now there is another camp operating in Delhi. Hopefully a local philanthropic organization could set up 20 or 30 camps in India, because they have a massive number of burn victims there."

Mr. Davis introduced the Indian surgeons to Prof. Josef Haik, director of the National Burn Center at Israel's Sheba Medical Center, where they had "an awesome cultural and medical exchange."

BAN now is raising \$1 million to establish the I-PEARLS (Israel Pediatric Aesthetic and Reconstructive Laser Surgery) Center of Excellence at Sheba under the direction of Drs. Haik and Arie Orenstein. The center will use a variety of Israeli-developed fractional CO2 lasers, supplied by BAN, to reduce the impact of scars in burned children.

"Professor Orenstein has been using lasers for close to 40 years, but the idea of using them in children is new even though there is no question about their efficacy and safety," Mr. Davis said.

The idea for I-PEARLS originated two years ago, when a 17-year-old girl confided in "Uncle Sam," as the campers call Mr. Davis, her fear that she would never be



able to find a date because of her disfiguring facial scars, the result of the burns she suffered in a house fire 11 years earlier. Her doctors did not have any solutions to offer other than a risky open surgery.

Her comment reminded Mr. Davis of something he'd learned very recently at the European Burn Congress held at Shriners Hospital in Boston.

"They were all talking about how lasers have become a primary tool rather than an adjunct tool," he said. "Without the risks of open surgery, new-generation CO2 ablative lasers are capable of making scars less noticeable and even enabling a kid with facial contractures to smile without effort."

"A single treatment can help release a contracture. A course of five to eight sessions can diminish the size and discoloration of scars. Deep CO2 laser surgery starts a process where the collagen reorganizes and improves appearance dramatically, with very few complications," he continued.

"When used in combination with minor plastic surgery to release the tension on a scar, laser treatment can really improve how kids look and feel, and also relieve the itching, which is a big problem."

Mr. Davis discovered that some of the companies making these cutting-edge lasers were located in the Yokne'am industrial park less than half an hour from Camp Sababa. And so the idea of I-PEARLS was conceived.

"I-PEARLS will become a center of clinical excellence teaching plastic surgeons



Burn Advocates Network founder and director Sam Davis, left, at a Israel Burn Association meeting with Dr. Moti Baratz (in uniform) and Professor Josef Haik, director of the National Burn Center and co-director of I-PEARLS.

and others about this new modality and how and when it should be used," he said. "It will also be a teaching and research center."

One area of research will be how lasers can deliver drugs in an evenly dispersed manner to fight scarring using the same holes created by the laser treatment.

Camp Sababa campers will be eligible for treatment at the center regardless of ability to pay. Later this year, proceeds of a celebrity chefs culinary festival planned in Israel by Karlitz and Company will go toward

defraying the cost of procedures.

Although Mr. Davis' work with BAN has come to focus primarily on Israel, the organization also works with American soldiers wounded in the Iraq war, and it also has provided assistance in Haiti ever since the 2010 earthquake, which caused many devastating burns.

BAN refurbished and stocked the only burn clinic operating in Haiti at the time, and built a physical and occupational therapy clinic at Cap Haitien's Justinian University Hospital. Davis sent over Bergen County

medical specialists, arranged for the shipment of tons of medical supplies, and implemented a Burn Prevention Campaign to educate more than half a million displaced Haitians sheltered in tent cities.

BAN continues to sponsor surgical residents from Haiti for training in burn treatment. One of these young surgeons now is studying in Jerusalem. "He is the first Haitian to train with lasers at the I-PEARLS Center. After his rotation he will bring back with him the much-needed techniques to treat burns," Mr. Davis said.

When he first met Dr. Yitzhak Kreiss, Sheba's director general, Mr. Davis noticed a photo on the wall that looked familiar.

"I realized we had both volunteered at the same hospital in Haiti," he said. "I'm proud to be associated with a hospital whose mission is to export healing."

Whether in Haiti, the United States, Israel, India, or Brazil, pediatric burn survivors are remarkably similar, Mr. Davis observes.

"They all desperately struggle to fit in to their schools, make friends, and not be judged by their scars or be bullied because they look different," he said. "We hope to make the combination of burn camp and laser surgery available to these kids and that someday it will become the standard of care globally."

"Burn camps restore the spirit. Lasers heal the scars. The combination is unquestionably synergistic."

For more information on BAN, call Mr. Davis at (201) 220-3908 or email him at [sam@burnadvocates.org](mailto:sam@burnadvocates.org).



Campers wear wetsuits before they go into the sea near Haifa.