

ABILITY TRIUMPHING OVER DISABILITY

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Over 11 million people are burned every year. According to The World Health Organization, burns are the 11th leading cause of death of children aged one through nine years and the fifth most common cause of non-fatal childhood injuries.

When a child suffers a burn injury, whether caused by accident or by criminal activity, it is a whole body trauma with far reaching repercussions. Long after the wounds are treated, the self-loathing and isolation can be crippling and attempts to re-enter the world overwhelming.

Sam Davis, the Founding Partner of prominent Teaneck law firm Davis, Saperstein and Salomon, has witnessed the aftermath of burn injuries many times in his career. For the last thirty years, he has been working with dozens of young burn victims and their families. Davis, a brilliant litigator, has won settlements on burn and explosion cases for his clients in excess of \$20 million dollars, yet their tragedies can never be fully assuaged with dollars or indictments.

"The overriding issue with burns," Davis explains, "is that 90 percent of the problem is not the actual burn, the scars or the contractures. It's what happens to the child's spirit, soul and psyche."

"Burn injuries are particularly devastating to children, who are at critical stages of developing their self-image," he continued. "Time just stands still. When they emerge from the initial trauma, hospitalization and therapy, they face a whole other world in which they feel defined by their scars. There is little support or guidance, i.e., psycho-social aftercare for this. After the doctors perform their surgeries, they pass the baton to the physical therapists. Then the baton is passed to psychologists and social workers whose efforts are typically short lived, measured in months - not the years and decades the child will have to cope with burn scars. Our culture, as all cultures, emphasizes beauty and appearance. So disfigurement from burns in which there is this void in the healing process, can lead to long term psychological problems, depression, isolation, drug abuse, even suicide."

A camp with a cause

As such, Davis began volunteering in burn camps around the U.S., and in 2007, he founded the Burn Advocates Network to formally address the challenges of burn injury recovery, rehabilitation and reintegration. Burn Advocates Network is, in effect, seeking to change the standard of care for burn victims globally.

Burn Advocate Networks began by creating music and recreational programs with counselors, doctors and psychologists



Campers from Burn Advocates Network's Camp Sababa.



Sam Davis showing photos of children in SABABA and KARMA burn camps. Photo by Hillary Viders

for burn camps throughout the U.S.

At burn camps, children make new friends and re-connect to their childhood. For many children, interacting with other burn victims can be reassuring and it breaks through their barriers of isolation and negative self-image. Campers also bond with former campers who return as counselors to help. The campers look up to these individuals as role models for a newly refashioned "can do" approach to life.

The success that Sam Davis witnessed in these burn camps led him to found Burn Advocates Network's own burn camps in Israel (Camp Sababa, whose campers are 60 percent Jewish and 40 percent Muslim) and India (Camp Karma). Camp Samba, a collaboration with the Brazil Burn Society will open this June in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Davis said recently, "We plan to have 10 Burn Camps in 10 countries by 2025, focusing on low-income populations where we are needed most."

Children age six to 16 come to Burn Advocates Network camp for four, five or six day stays, during which time they enjoy a variety of fun filled activities including sports, playing musical instruments and arts and crafts projects. Each camp has activities that are popular in that country. For example, in India, the children play cricket, and in Israel they have "football" (soccer) and surfing. Occasionally, special celebrities visit the camps, such as Iron Chef Winners, who teach cooking classes and star athletes of the Maccabee games.

A very important activity in the burn camps is the "Talking Stick," in which the children sit together and take turns holding the stick, talking about their injury and expressing their feelings. For most of these youngsters, it is the first opportunity they have to do this. Most burn victims' families create a shroud of silence around their child and never discuss the injury or the aftermath.

Medical and psychological assistance

The Burn Advocates Network staff is comprised of many leading experts in the field including, Hani Mansour, M.D., the Burn Advocates medical director; Yuliana Eshel, O.T.; Nili Arbel, P.T., MPT; Psychologist Dr Ruth Rimmer, M.D.; and Anjay Khandelwal, M.D., the medical advisor at Camp Karma.

Burn camp has been shown to have important psychological benefits: studies have reported that participants in burn camps have decreased isolation, improved self-esteem, improved teamwork, promotion of coping skills and improved social skills.

"At burn camps, children learn coping mechanisms for their new self-image and they come to appreciate that they're not doomed to a horrible life without any joy," Davis said. "By being with other burn victims and role models, they see that they can lead normal lives with happy, fulfilling relationships. We give

children that are lost (to follow-up care) a navigation system, like GPS, to show them that they are, indeed, on the map."

Burn Advocates Network is so convinced of the effectiveness of burn camps that they are pushing to have them recognized by the medical establishment in the U.S. and abroad as a "standard of care".

Davis confronts horror in Haiti

In addition to his work with Burn Camps, Davis began making annual trips to Haiti after the catastrophic earthquake in 2010.

"When I arrived in Haiti, I saw how deficient burn care was in that country. I knew that I had to help," he said.

Burn Advocates Network subsequently shipped over 50 tons of medical supplies to Haiti and started a physical therapy clinic at the Justinian University Medical Center that was capable of helping burn victims avoid disabling contractures.

Davis continues to help in Haiti and is currently building a network in Cap Haitian for specialized burn care and burn prevention. He also sponsors Haitian surgical residents to come to the U.S. to attend American Burn Association meetings and to participate in externships so they can learn to practice burn care in Haiti.

New and exciting

Some of the most exciting news reported by Burn Advocates Network is a medical breakthrough that is being pioneered in Israel. The organization is working with Lumenis, an Israeli company that manufactures a state of the art CO2 fractional laser that can revise raised or discolored scars and relieve tightness and chronic itching. Burn Advocates Network is creating a pediatric laser facility at Tel Hashomer, The National Burn Center that will allow campers and hundreds of other children to have non-surgical laser scar revision. The first group of campers have just had their first treatments on a loaned laser. Preliminary results have been very encouraging. Our campers feel better after one of the 4-6 scheduled sessions. Davis predicts that "Within the year, we are hoping to not only create the first pediatric laser burn scar unit in the Middle East but to publish our data in peer-reviewed journals."

Note - Burn Advocates Network is a non-profit organization and is funded solely by donors. They are currently soliciting donations to build a much needed modern pediatric laser burn center in Israel. Information about supporting Burn Advocates Network's initiatives can be found at info@burnadvocates.org.

PHOTO COURTESY BURN ADVOCATES NETWORK