



(Jeff Taylor/Journal)

From left, Montgomery County residents Avivah Litan, Jocelyn Krifcher, Anne Clemons and Aviva Tessler are the co-founders of Operation Embrace, a county-based support network for victims of violence in Israel.

## **An ‘intimate’ international embrace**

By SARA MICHAEL  
*Journal staff writer*

A 13-year-old Israeli boy lost an eye in a suicide bombing at a bus stop, and a young Arab woman lost part of her leg. An Israeli soldier in Jenin was shot several times, leaving seven brothers and sisters at home while his parents stay with him in the hospital.

The injuries are just a sampling of those wounded by the violence in Israel. Four Montgomery County women feel there is a great need for comforting the injured, who they say are sometimes forgotten after the media headlines fade.

Rather than raise large amounts of money or mail care packages to the victims, the four women formed Operation Embrace, a Potomac-based organization that sent members to Israel to offer a personal touch.

‘We don’t see ourselves as a fund-raising effort,’ said Jocelyn Krifcher, one of the founding members of the organization. “This was an opportunity to make a personal, intimate, familiar, human contact.”

Aviva Tessler, whose husband is the rabbi at Congregation Beth Shalom in Potomac, spent half of last year in Israel on a sabbatical.

There, she and her husband donated packages to victims of violence in area hospitals, but realized the people needed more than toiletries and food.

‘Instead, what we found was a tremendous need for us to stay and talk to these people,’ Tessler said. “They really wanted the human contact. One day, they’re headlines and the next day, they’re forgotten.”

Upon her return to Potomac, Tessler sought a way to continue her outreach and get people involved on a local level, and she and her friends formed Operation Embrace. Through what she called grass-roots efforts, the group has received support from about 1,000 people: cards drawn by

Jewish Day School students and money to buy gifts and donations for care packages.

Two weeks ago, she and two others returned to Israeli hospitals and rehabilitation centers to bring laptop computers, Game Boys, cameras and sweets.

Those who went paid their own airfare. Tessler said they encountered a lot of tears and hand-holding.

The 13-year-old hurt in a suicide bombing had been resigned to bed for more than a month when they visited him, Tessler said. He had missed school and couldn't be active.

Operation Embrace brought the boy a laptop computer, cards from local children and gifts for the rest of the family to keep him connected and his spirits high.

"There was this look of amazement on his face," Tessler recalled. "He didn't say much. He had an opening smile. It was heartwarming."

Tessler said their efforts would make the struggles of people in Israel more real and tangible for local residents.

"It's hard for us to imagine just going to Starbucks and having a bomb go off," she said.

The names of people killed in the violence are posted on the Internet, Krifcher said, on sites she checks every morning. But the injured are given no attention - and often when a person is classified as "moderately injured," she said, they could have lost both legs and need serious medical attention.

This recent trip to Israel allowed the women to make contacts at hospitals and health centers to keep in touch with the victims' families and facilitate further outreach. The group now wants to link Israeli families with Montgomery County residents to create a personal relationship.

"We're the messengers," Krifcher said. "We want to have our community pick up where we left off."

At a meeting planned for tonight at Congregation Beth Shalom, Operation Embrace plans to present the stories and pictures of the people they reached in Israel, for hopes of finding congregation members eager to adopt a family. Krifcher said they have about 30 families ready to connect to local families.

Misha Galperin, executive vice president of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, said they support the organization's grass-root efforts.

"It's a wonderful idea, Galperin said. "It really personalizes the situation. It allows people to identify with a family.

Since November, the federation has been raising money for Israel, and the efforts have gathered speed in the last few months, Galperin said.

The federation has raised more than \$15 million to provide relief for victims' families, security supplies, such as bullet-proof vests and armored school buses, and socialservice programs that were cut by the government.

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