



Aviva Tessler (left) shares her stories of meeting Israeli victims of terrorism with Jocelyn Krifcher and Anne Clemons. The three women and Avivah Litan (not pictured)~ all of Potomac~ co-founded Operation Embrace, a grassroots effort to provide comfort to Israelis who have been victims of terrorist attacks

Women 'embrace' victims of terrorism

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Staff Writer

News of suicide bombings in Israel splash across the television screen or the front page of a national newspaper, but it's not something to which the average American can relate.

But four Jewish women who live in Potomac understand.

They've met the victims who have had their limbs blown off in blasts and are still filled with pieces of shrapnel. They've heard their nightmarish stories of seeing body parts and blood in their dreams. They've met the people struggling to piece their lives back together months after being caught at the wrong place at the wrong time.

"As much as we know to do nice things, to visit people and to do kind things for people, I think we really underestimate how far it goes and what it means for people who are really isolated," said Aviva Tessler, one of the four women.

Tessler returned on May 16 from a six-day mission to Israel. "And also they are repetitively saying, 'Once we're in the headlines, the next day we're forgotten.'"

Tessler, Anne Clemons, Jocelyn Krifcher and Avivah Litan said the victims' horrifying stories were too heartbreaking to ignore.

So the four women, who have known each other for years and attend Beth Sholom synagogue in Potomac, co-founded Operation Embrace in 2001. Tessler is a psychologist with a private practice and a mother of two children, Clemons is an accountant and mother of three children, Krifcher is a mother of four children and Litan is a research analyst and mother of two children. Operation Embrace is a grassroots organization that

provides comfort and resources to Israelis who have been victims of terrorist attacks, mostly suicide bombings, and connects members of the Jewish American community to Israeli victims.

"You hear about the numbers, but you don't know about their personal lives," Clemons said. "We looked at each other and said it was too compelling. We had to do something."

They were inspired to reach out to the severely injured after Tessler, who went to Israel in 2000 with her husband Joel, a rabbi who was on sabbatical, returned with photos of victims she had met during her stay.

They sat around the kitchen table and brainstormed on how to help the victims. They decided that "embracing" them with visits to the hospitals and homes or keeping in touch with phone calls, e-mails and letters would be the way to show they cared.

Since then, the women have received \$250,000 in donations and response from community members in the county and throughout the country.

They have donated laptops and other items to young people who lost their legs to bombings and bought plane tickets to Poland for those who cannot afford school-sponsored trips to visit Holocaust sites.

They ordered a larger bed for a woman who was stabbed in the back at least 20 times about 10 months ago. She needed a big bed because her 11-year-old daughter wanted to cuddle next to her incapacitated mom.

"The outpouring from the American Jewish community, especially the local community, is almost overwhelming to us," Clemons said. "People here are so helpless. They want to help, and they're drawn by the headlines and what's news over in Israel. But at times, we don't know what we can do. This is also an opportunity for people to reach out."

The group works primarily with social workers that arrange visits to victims' homes and give advice and background on what the volunteers should do and bring.

The women arrange trips to Israel, usually in May and November, for local residents who want to make a connection with those overseas.

"It's almost like matchmaking," Aviva Tessler said. "You want to facilitate other people to have the opportunity to connect with people over there...It's real easy to write a check, but it takes a lot more effort and really a lot more concern to say, 'I'm going to actually call someone and say how are you? I'm thinking about you.'"

The group of women is working towards connecting more local community members to the victims in Israel.

They also keep in touch with the victims they have already met through e-mails, letters and phone calls to show that they care and continue to think about them.

Six people, including the Tesslers, Michelle Lazerow, Jill Kline, Golda Jacobs and Nina Spiegelman, all of Potomac, traveled to Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa and visited victims in their homes and hospitals.

Lazerow and Kline recently met at Tessler's home and helped to brief the other founding members of the organization about their trip.

"The beauty and power of this story is this little country is willing to take anyone and everyone who wants to better their life," Joel Tessler said. "This Jewish country is so open to all different groups of people and unfortunately, terror does not have a lens. It goes after any innocent person who happens to be in the way of extreme hatred."

Visit www.operationembrace.org to learn more.

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