

GALLERY גלריה

Kindest cuts: Salons offer free hairdos and lots of sympathy

The Women's Courtyard takes care of the hair – and social needs – of young, disadvantaged women of all backgrounds

Danna Harman

For many women, going to get their hair done is an activity that's only partly related to hair at all. Sure, there is a lot of talk about highlights and split ends, but discussions about the pros and cons of conditioning masks tend to quickly veer off into other realms. Work problems are aired, relationships analyzed, life's frustrations admitted and secrets spilled.

And this universal fact of life got Liora Kessel thinking. It was 2003, and she was just about to open the first Women's Courtyard at the intersection of the three poorest neighborhoods in Jaffa, with her co-founder, Mirit Sidi. The idea behind the nonprofit was to offer a safe space to any teenage or young woman, usually in some sort of distress, who needed somewhere to hang out and just be herself.

Coaching and therapy were offered. So was private tutoring, help in liaising with community agencies, legal aid, various training courses and emergency interventions when needed. But more exciting – to many in the neighborhood – was the free, professional hair salon that the founders added in a moment of inspiration.

With its door propped open, cozy couches, hot food cooking in the kitchen and smoking area out back, the

Courtyard attracts a range of visitors today. Jews, Christians and Muslims show up. Gays, straights and transgenders check out the premises. Bedouin who have run away from home, Ethiopians who have quit school, and pregnant single-mother immigrants from Russia – all are welcome, no questions asked and no unsolicited advice given. Some are suffering from terrible abuse or other

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problems. Others just have no one at home to talk to. All, it seems, are happy about the free cuts and blow-drys.

"At first the girls were trying to figure out what 'the catch' was," says Shani Werner, who runs the Haifa branch of the Women's Courtyard. "These are not the kind of girls who feel they deserve much. But when they slowly realized they weren't being tricked, they relaxed.

"Our philosophy is that the girls know better than anyone else what they need," she adds. "We are here for them if they want to figure out how to dig their way out of debt, need to find a doctor, or are interested in finding a job that is not, say, working the front door at a strip club for under-the-table cash. But they could also come in for a whole year and just do their roots, have some lunch and say nothing."

The success of the model allowed the NGO to expand: There are now four Women's Courtyard branches around the country, as well as a fashion store in Jaffa where some of the project's members receive training and are employed. With a yearly budget of \$4 million – including many gifts in kind – the network employs 37 full- and part-time staffers who work side-by-side with dozens of volunteers. About half of the funding comes from foundations and private donors, with the rest – in a nod to the organization's effectiveness – coming from various government agencies and the municipalities in which the Courtyards are active.

Kessel says that every year, the different branches each welcome an average of 300 girls and women between the ages of 13 and 25, with the majority returning regularly. And while the salons are intended to lure at-risk individuals to the cen-

ters, they are far more than a gimmick, Kessel stresses: They symbolize everything the Courtyards stand for, starting with respect for the women who come through their doors.

"Actually, most of the more important revelations and discussions take place outside of the salon," says social worker Avigail Hatzor-Sivan, who runs the Netanya branch, which is located in Hefziba, a neighborhood that is almost entirely populated by Israelis of Ethiopian origin, and has over 50 percent unemployment. "But the salon is where it starts."

"One's defenses go down when sitting there in the salon, looking in the mirror. It's a vulnerable moment," continues Hatzor-Sivan. "We use that moment to wrap these girls in love and care. Sometimes it is, for them, the first time they can trust someone to touch them. And that's when things begin to happen."

Lunch and sympathy

Zhanna Vinokur, the stylist at the Haifa branch, has been a fixture at that Courtyard since it opened three years ago in the low-income neighborhood of Hadar.

On a recent Monday, she was busy brushing a thick coat of bleach onto a 20-year-old's black hair. The girl, a regular, had walked in earlier crying, and announced her intention to make a "big change." Disregarding some

pushback from Vinokur, who suggested a less extreme color, the young woman settles in for the day.

With a towel wrapped around her head and an hour or more to wait, the young woman wandered into the common room to have a bite of lunch – hamburgers, chopped salad and baked cauliflower – watch television and catch up with friends lounging around. Noticing a postcard falling off the bulletin board, she tacked it back

up: "You were born because you are going to be important to someone," it read.

"I'm not the kind of person who usually opens up," said the soon-to-be platinum blond, who goes by the name "Marvelous." She is not sure what her father is up to, or where he is, and her mother is living in a psychiatric ward. A younger sister is living with a relative in Petah Tikva. "I can't say I have a home," said Marvelous. "But I guess I would say that here

I feel okay."

She had been crying earlier, she explained, because a friend from the council housing project had convinced her to pluck her eyebrows – to arguably disastrous results. "That's why," Marvelous explained, her voice trailing off, "...and [there are] other not-great things too." Maybe later, she would discuss them with someone, she added. Or maybe not. In any case, she will be back tomorrow.



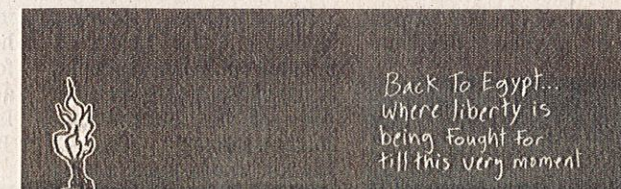
The salon at the Netanya branch of the Women's Courtyard. Bedouin runaways, Ethiopian dropouts, and pregnant single-mother immigrants from Russia – all are welcome.

Nimrod Glickman

New anthology translates Arab political cartoons into English

Rich Tenorio

What do a scatological genie arising from a toilet, Hosni Mubarak, Occupy Wall Street, and husband-and-wife bloggers navigat-



Palestinian conflict. The "Filsteazy" cartoons by the Palestinian duo of Mahdi Fleifel and Basel Nasr discuss Palestinian family origins and identity, but do not directly mention Israel. Yet during the last