

Naale: An Exceptional School Producing Outstanding Students

By David Brummer

Set in lush and well-kept grounds, the Naale Elite Academy on the Mosenson Campus in Hod HaSharon has the feel of an early state Zionist community or perhaps even of somewhere outside of Israel.

However, the Mosenson students learn alongside an Israeli high-school and Hebrew is soon heard reverberating around the campus.

Now in its 27th year, this particular campus is one of the largest Naale boarding schools in Israel, attracting each year over 150 students from more than 20 countries. The program is English-speaking, although there are students whose mother-tongue is not English, and who hail from lands as far afield as Japan, China, Germany, Italy, Ar-

gentina, Chile and Brazil. Naale accepts any student eligible to make Aliyah according to the Law of Return.

learn in an intensive ulpan (Hebrew-language classes) for one or two years, depending on their level of proficiency and whether they arrived for ninth or tenth grade. Naale students take a special matriculation exam, customized for new immigrants, in order to enable them to graduate with grades that reflect their academic level and allow them to succeed on par with native-born Israelis.

As one might expect from a twenty first century program, the focus is not exclusively on academic studies but also on developing students beyond the classroom. In the best Israeli tradition, there are opportunities to take part in social activities; non-classroom educational activities, with a stress on ecology and the environment; as well as all kinds of sports, including basketball, running and even mixed martial arts.

It's obvious that Naale takes a concerted interest not only in the individual as a student, but also, in how they are developing and coping as a human being. The age at which students attend the academy can be a precarious time, the tricky transition from (sometimes) awkward teenager to flourishing young adult, and there are checks and balances in place to try and manage it as successfully as possible which is especially important, considering that the students are far from their nuclear families.

Most of the students interviewed noted that acclimating to the school had its

moments, but that overall it wasn't too difficult. From our conversations it seemed that although there were students from different backgrounds and cultures the fact that each was in the same situation helped build a sense of camaraderie. In addition to the students creating their own informal support network, there are official systems of support, including counselors who live nearby and meet with students frequently. Also available for students without immediate family in Israel is a network of carefully selected local families who offer to host students for Shabbat or holiday meals, and who act as their parents-away-from-home.

Sapir Keren is an 18-year-old originally from Miami. A former student of Franklin Middle School, she has been at Naale since ninth grade. Sapir said that she loved the program, notwithstanding one or two wobbles that affect almost all participants. She did add, however, that in her opinion the program is not for everyone. "The most successful students," she said, "are the mentally tough and independently-minded ones. I mean, kids who choose to study thousands of miles away from their parents are already independent, but it's more than that." In a non-judgmental way she added that if people need to be in constant contact with their parents or family back home, or if they are too unsure about how they will cope far away in a supportive but challenging environment, then perhaps the program is not for them. Keren admitted that there were some difficult times, and speaking on the phone or Skype is not the same as being physically present with family, but "the amazing counselors are a real source of help and support."

Sapir mirrored the remarks of other students when speaking about the value of time spent away from the school, such as on the different tiyulim (trips). "Although we're with the same people we see every

day, the change of environment and experiencing a different pace and place allows us to see things from a different perspective. It also helps to strengthen the bond between us and our connection with the land."

Sapir appreciated the time and space for growth, sharing that the "whole experience has been awesome; fun activities... it's all beautiful." Such has been the program's effect on her that she has already recommended it to several people in her home community.

For Lior Tal, an 18-year-old from Los Angeles, the experience has been a bit more condensed; she only joined the school for grades 11 and 12. A former Milken High School student, her Israeli parents spoke Hebrew to her at home, but she still had a lot to make up.

"One of the reasons I wanted to join the program was that I felt like I was living in a bubble," said Tal. "Being exposed to different peoples and cultures and languages has helped me become a more open-minded person," she added. Tal highlighted that having joined midway through the program did create an additionally tough environment, and not because she wasn't welcomed. There was so much work to catch up on and the others were already settled into their routine. Looking back on her time at Naale, however, Tal considered it like a second home, and her fellow students in her building, like family.



Lior Tal



Sapir Keren



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The format seems simple: Bring interested and connected ninth or tenth grade students and supplant them into Israel. That's the theory anyway, and judging by the mature and driven students the school helps to mold, it has met with a large degree of success.

Students are often drawn to the Naale school through a pre-existing connection with either Israel or Hebrew, or both. But with or without any such connection, students



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