

Shifting kids in

THE GEERZ bike program promotes physical fitness, self-esteem and teamwork building in kids. (Courtesy)



BIKE GUIDE Tzvi Drutman with seven- and eight-year-olds. (Courtesy)

• ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN

Every Friday, 12-year-old Naftali Gros eagerly looks forward to mountain biking in the Judean Hills with Geerz, a youth program founded by Ramat Beit Shemesh resident Rabbi Nachum Wasosky to foster mental, physical, emotional and spiritual development.

"Geerz has taught my son that nothing is impossible if you try hard enough," says Dr. Shoshana Gros, a pediatrician who has referred several patients to the program. "He returns from the ride exhilarated, excited and exhausted. It real-

ly has become the highlight of his week, and ours as well."

Gros likes the way Geerz utilizes mountain biking as a tool to increase physical fitness, self-esteem, teamwork and a love of nature.

"It is ideal for children with behavioral, emotional and/or attention-deficit issues as well as for an average child," she enthuses. "In addition, it helps children have a goal-oriented focus, which makes them feel accomplished after each ride."

Wasosky, an experienced youth counselor, brought his mountain bike along when he and his family made aliya from Denver in 2008. Not seeing many neighbors hitting the hilly trails near home,

he solicited bike-mates and built up a list of 150 men.

"After a year, I saw I was changing and growing tremendously, persevering more in my personal life. Getting up hills and having to overcome hurdles and fears was manifesting itself in the rest of my life at home and work, and spiritually from being out in nature," notes Wasosky.

"I asked everybody on the list what mountain biking had done for them. I got about 50 responses, and they all said it helped them as a father and husband, and professionally. I said to myself, if it's affecting doctors, lawyers and businessmen so profoundly, surely it could have

an effect on youth."

At the time, Wasosky was running a local teen center through Hakshiva, a nonprofit for at-risk children. He enrolled in a marriage and family counseling therapy program and studied the concept of adventure therapy.

"Three-and-a-half years ago, I started taking 10 of the kids I was working with for bike rides on Friday mornings," recounts Wasosky. His bike buddies donated the bikes.

"These kids were out partying Thursday nights; I'd get them up early, we'd ride a couple of hours and then come home to a brunch. I asked Adam Rosenberg, an old friend who owns a Holy Ba-

nto high gear



'HAVING TO overcome hurdles and fears was manifesting itself in the rest of my life,' says Rabbi Nachum Wasosky. (Courtesy)

gels branch, to give me bagels and cream cheese, and my wife made hot chocolate and eggs."

Behavioral changes weren't long in coming. Some of the older kids ripped up their cigarettes because they were upset they couldn't make it up a hill. Others stopped going out to drink Thursday nights. "It made them feel better; it gave them a purpose," stresses Wasosky.

When he suspended the rides at the onset of summer, parents urged him to continue. "So I signed up 10 kids for pay. The feedback from parents turned this into a business," Wasosky explains.

He officially founded Geerz three years ago. His wife, Shana, who has a master's degree in education, and local social worker Eliav Friedman, devised the curriculum. Geerz is a nonprofit; though participants pay a nominal fee, most of the expenses (including the bikes and safety gear) are covered by donations, and scholarships are available.

The organization is supported by the Jewish National Fund in Australia and the US, and by Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael-Jewish National Fund. "KKL-JNF built a single-track, 14-km. bike trail in the Yishi Forest behind Moshav Zecharia near Beit Shemesh, and we brought 150 Geerz parents and kids to help," says Wasosky.

The focus has shifted from at-risk to "run-of-the-mill kids," as Wasosky puts it. Geerz currently runs 10 30-week groups, comprising 100 boys aged seven to 19.

"We created groups of 10 kids at a time with two bike guides. They go out for an hour and a half around our area, and halfway through the ride they stop and the guides give the kids some taffy and teach lessons based on the Torah and Ethics of the Fathers. These are integrated with a biking lesson and a life leadership lesson. If we teach about how critical it is to work as a team and look after your fellow rider on the trail, we also talk about how to clean and oil the bike chain. The lessons reinforce each other."

About two dozen participants were referred by their pediatricians, for the therapeutic benefits of biking for conditions including low muscle tone and ADHD. Wasosky points to a 2012 study in Massachusetts showing that in middle school-age children diagnosed with or displaying ADHD-like symptoms, cycling enhanced information processing, improved attention and mood, reduced impulsivity and accelerated cognitive performance. Two neurologists on the Geerz board of directors are planning their own study on the effects of the program.

Pediatrician Efrayim Rosenbaum has referred patients to Geerz as a form of movement therapy. "Geerz is particularly successful for kids with low self-esteem, depression or anxiety," he says. "The kids gain more independent skills on the bike as their bodies become more disciplined and the challenges get higher. Overcoming those challenges has a wonderful impact on self-esteem, mood

regulation and ability to concentrate. We've sent a lot of kids and have seen some wonderful successes."

One of his referrals was a 12-year-old boy who had gotten expelled from school for behavioral issues; the boy started Geerz in tandem with psychological counseling. "After two or three sessions on the bike, the mother came to me and said, 'What a difference! He's so much happier and back in school.'"

His own son, Shalom Noah, 11, switched from baseball to Geerz this year. "He looks forward to it every week. I've gone out with him twice during the sessions and they do a lot of stuff I couldn't do, relating to overcoming fear and physical limitations."

Sarah Bauer enrolled her son Aharon Yonah in Geerz two years ago to boost his self-confidence. Now 11, Aharon Yonah "really looks forward to the Friday bike rides and has made new friends. Our older son did Geerz last year to burn some energy, and now he rides on his own and knows how to maintain his bike. I think there's something in the freedom of being out in the mountains," Bauer observes.

"Due to the nature of mountain biking, it is inevitable that participants will be positively affected mentally," asserts Wasosky. "Being out in the hills provides them with time to unplug from our fast world and literally have a 'breath of fresh air.' This directly affects the rest of their week, by helping them think and act more calmly and clearly."

"As the curriculum encourages participants to mentally internalize their increased mountain-biking skills, as well as teaching them first aid and emergency procedures, they recognize they can succeed in life. This newfound confidence overflows into their daily routine."

Groups will be available for girls in August, when immigrant Jessie Brownstein arrives in Ramat Beit Shemesh. "She was a pro mountain biker and found us on an Internet search," says Wasosky, the father of five children ages 7 to 19. "After she called me, I more or less hired her on the spot to start our girls program. There have been a lot of requests here from parents of girls in the national-religious crowd, and half a dozen mothers want to be guides."

In response to inquiries from parents and pediatricians, Wasosky is hoping to expand Geerz across Israel. He also offers camp-based programs throughout the US during the summer months.

"This year we had our first Lag Ba'omer bike-a-thon to raise funds for kids who want to be in Geerz but cannot afford the equipment," he details. "We had more than 100 boys participating, broken up into four different groups. Our bike guides volunteered to lead it, and about 15 local businesses sponsored the event. The boys raised NIS 50,000 for their peers."

"This is an extremely impactful experience they will never forget."

For more information: www.geerz.org/