

Shatner helps disabled Israeli children

Dina Kraft

Actor William Shatner and his wife went to Israel to visit their project — therapeutic horseback riding centers for disabled children.

TEL AVIV, June 4 (JTA) — William Shatner's eyes grow wide recalling the sight of an Israeli quadriplegic blind boy jogging a horse around a ring.

The 8-year-old learned to ride at a therapeutic riding center. The center is one of about 30 in Israel that will benefit if the television star and his wife are successful in raising \$10 million as part of an initiative, launched with the Jewish National Fund, to help children with disabilities.

"Horses make miracles," said Shatner, who was in Israel last week, translating from an alliterative Hebrew slogan. "We've fallen in love with that phrase."

The couple is hoping that horses will help create even more miracles by bringing together disabled children from Israel, the Palestinian areas and Jordan.

This is about "using horses as a tool to forget differences," said Shatner, who first found fame as Captain Kirk on "Star Trek" and has recently returned to television success with his role as lawyer Denny Crane on the hit television show, "Boston Legal."

"We are extending a hand to say we want to help kids. We want to help Israeli Arabs, Palestinians, Bedouin, Druse — whose only common denominator is that they are children," Shatner said. "It's about extending a hand of peace as well as healing handicapped minds and bodies."

While in Israel, Shatner and his wife, Elizabeth, both avid horseback riders, visited several of the main therapeutic riding centers in the country, from the Galilee to the Negev Desert.

The benefits of riding for people with disabilities are vast. Horseback riding moves the rider's body in a gentle and rhythmic way as the horse moves in a similar way to the human gait. Riders who have physical disabilities from accidents, terrorist attacks or disease often improve their flexibility, balance and coordination.

Those with mental or emotional disabilities often benefit from the patience and self-esteem they get from forging a connection with the horse.

It's also about self-confidence. For those in wheelchairs, for example, suddenly finding themselves high in the air on a horse can be an image-altering experience. For them, the horses become their legs.

"This is all a result of a horse that has managed to take them out of themselves," said Elizabeth Shatner, who has worked with horses for years.

One of her and her husband's most memorable moments on the visit was meeting a teenager whose mental disabilities make it difficult for him to speak. While sitting on a horse near them, he blurted out in perfect English that no one realized he spoke, "I love to ride horses."

Training disabled people to ride is expensive. The horses they ride must be trained very well and each rider has

several trainers accompanying him or her during the ride.

The William Shatner/Jewish National Fund Therapeutic Riding Consortium Endowment for Israel aims to raise \$10 million to support the some 30 therapeutic riding centers in Israel and provide scholarships for children.

The idea to help the centers in Israel started over a lunch at a Los Angeles diner between Shatner and his old friend Marvin Markowitz. Markowitz, a real estate developer and a major JNF donor, suggested Shatner bring his interest in therapeutic riding to Israel.

Shatner is Jewish and grew up in Montreal.

“Jerusalem existed in the Haggadah; that’s all I knew. Now suddenly we are here,” he said.

For more information, please contact smorr@jnf.org



Alon Levi

Actor William Shatner and his wife Elizabeth meet a disabled riding student at the Haemek Riding Center in Afula, Israel, May 28, 2006. The Shatners were in Israel to raise funds for therapeutic riding centers in the country.