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Israeli Gay Leaders Visit SF

Noa Raz, one of three Israeli queer youth activists who visited San Francisco last week, recalled the horror of August 1 when a gunman opened fire on a group of queer youths at Tel Aviv's gay community center.

Raz spoke to about 40 members of San Francisco's Jewish LGBT community on November 2, a day after Israeli officials announced the arrest and detainment (which occurred last month) of a suspect in the attack. However, Israeli police don't believe the suspect is the gunman.

"There was blood everywhere," recounted Raz.

A former editor for an Israeli newspaper, she said that she used her press card to bypass security. She saw the blood, the kids, and "could still hear screams," she told her San Francisco audience.

Raz, 30, the Tel Aviv coordinator and director of resource development for the Israel Gay Youth Organization (IGY), is touring the U.S. with two other Israeli gay community leaders: Avner Dafni, executive director of IGY, and Etai Pinkas, a former Tel Aviv city council member. Their goals were to learn more about queer youth programs in the United States, connect with local Jewish LGBT community leaders, and to thank the communities in several cities for the outpouring of support following the attack.

The group was also raising funds for IGY.

The August incident left two queer youths dead, including Nir Katz, whose partner, Thomas Schmidt, was featured in a video documenting the attack. Another person also died, and 10 others were wounded.

Katz was everything to Schmidt, he said in the film. The young gay male couple was together for four and a half years.

As a result of the attack, openly gay Knesset member MK Nitzan Horowitz announced plans to introduce legislation to extend anti-incitement laws to include the LGBT community ? similar to the hate crimes law signed by President Barack Obama ? to Israel's parliament during the fall

session that began last month, according to an article in the *Jerusalem Post*.

Homophobia on the rise

"[This] is the first massive hate crime in Israel," said Raz, who hopes the bill will pass. "We don't have a history of people being martyred because they are gay."

"Anti-gay hate crimes is something new that Israel is beginning to deal with," added Dafni, who said IGY is now receiving more threatening anti-gay phone calls claiming "you are dirty" and that the organization is "disgusting," and "we will kill you all."

Pinkas agreed with Raz that Tel Aviv's LGBT community is not used to being targeted for violent attacks, but said homophobia is on the rise. Pinkas believes that the recent increase in anti-gay violence in Israel could be a potential backlash against the country's LGBT rights movement's successes in the past 15 years. Homosexuality was decriminalized for consenting adults (ages 16 and older) in Israel in 1988.

"We believe what happened on August 1 was maybe on one hand an attempt to frighten what we've achieved in the past decade or more," said Pinkas, who pointed out that Israel is struggling with LGBT rights like the U.S.

But Pinkas and Israeli queer leaders are optimistic about the future. Since the attack, there was a gathering of nearly 100,000 people on a Mediterranean beach for a rally to support Israel's LGBT community, and Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, spoke out against the attack.

Inspired by youths' courage

Three months after the incident Israel's LGBT community remains vigilant and proactive. The youth advocates are inspired and encouraged by the young people's resilient spirit and courage after hundreds of the nation's queer youth converged on the center during the aftermath and came out to their families, because, "They didn't want to die without their mother knowing," Raz said.

Since the shooting IGY has experienced a 30 percent increase in activities throughout the 36 weekly group meetings and social activities run in 20 Israeli cities as well as the organization's interactive Web site, which receives more than 3,000 hits monthly, according to Dafni.

Established in 2002, IGY serves more than 1,500 queer youths between the ages of 15-18 and 18-23 monthly, according to the organization's fact sheet.

"Some horrific act of violence often illuminates the underlying violence or pervasive harassment or isolation that is going on every day," said Carolyn Laub, executive director of the San Francisco-based Gay-Straight Alliance Network, who met last week with the delegates and was joined by Danielle Askini, GSA Network's national program manager. The goal of the meeting was to learn about the GSA Network to potentially implement it in Israel and to exchange information and experiences, both organizations' leaders said.

"What is really powerful is that they've recognized that gay-straight alliances are a way to address the problem of everyday violence that young people are experiencing," Laub said.

Creating change

In the aftermath of the shooting, two major changes have already happened. IGY is working with Israel's ministry of education and the department of social services, Dafni said. And some community leaders from the Tel Aviv gay festival participated in public service announcements against homophobia, Raz added.

Now the queer youth advocates are reaching out to supporters abroad to exchange ideas and look at model programs, like GSA Network.

"We feel particularly honored to meet with leaders of the organization that is coming and to share ideas across different cultural context," said Laub, especially since some GSA members actively organized vigils after the shooting.

Laub was particularly interested in sharing how various laws have been instrumental in helping to form gay-straight alliances in public schools and how to adapt that in Israel.

"They are interested in creating similar opportunities in schools to come together and address LGBT student rights and the treatment of LGBT youth in schools in Israel," Laub added.

Laub was struck by the similarities between anti-gay violence against LGBT young people like Matthew Shepard, Gwen Araujo, and Lawrence King, and the response by citizens to "transform that grief into action," she said.

Violent crimes against LGBT youths have "helped fuel the growth of the GSA movement to be as successful as it is today," added Laub, who hopes to continue aiding IGY with its ongoing efforts to provide programs that work within the educational and political system.

Lisa Finkelstein, director of the Jewish Community Federation's LGBT Alliance, one of the presenters of the event, recalled how important and instrumental the gay youth group she attended at a St. Louis church helped her come out and embrace her sexuality as a queer Jewish woman.

"It was so formidable to me," said Finkelstein, pointing out that spiritual and LGBT community leaders are equipped with the tools to help queer youth "feel empowered to be a part of this larger community."

Dafni said IGY is in the process of developing more programs that they hope will also be culturally diverse, including Israel's Russian and Ethiopian immigrant communities and Palestinian and Arab queer youth. He also hopes to create an Israeli-American youth leaders exchange program to continue learning from each other, he said.

Finkelstein hopes the exchange "will help [Israelis] heal their own community" and teach them how to build a strong queer youth network.

In addition to JCF, the event was co-sponsored by the New Israel Fund, the Consul General of Israel, the Jewish Community Relations Council, Congregation Emanu-El, Congregation Sha'ar Zahav, and the San Francisco SF LGBT Community Center's youth team.

To learn more about IGY, visit www.igy.org.il [1].

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News Article
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Bay Area Reporter
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