Delivering Solutions on a Local Level: From Vision to Reality

A social entrepreneur is a pragmatic visionary who aims to achieve large scale, systemic and sustainable social change through a new invention, development of a different approach, or through a rigorous application of known technologies and strategies.

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The featured presenter of the Social Entrepreneurial Forum’s March event was Merav Ben Ari, an IDC Alumni, who has turned her vision for a better society into a reality. A group of students from the IDC took an afternoon field trip to visit this realization of Ben-Ari’s vision, “Derech Ha Etgar”, a center for at-risk youth in Herzliya. At the center, the IDC students learned important lessons and gained the necessary tools for achievement in the social sector.

A Netanya native, and a practicing lawyer with an MBA, 33-year-old, Merav Ben-Ari was the winning contestant of the television reality show Seeking: A Leader (Darush: Manhig) in 2006. With the prize money of over a million dollars, Ben-Ari, has created ‘Through Challenge’ (Derech Ha Etgar), an after-school program, now in Netanya and Herzliya, aimed at helping troubled male youths, ages 13-15, build self-esteem and confidence through the combination of traditional after-school activities such as tutoring and mentoring, and more innovative techniques such as extreme or “challenge” sports. Climbing walls, kickboxing, judo, combat/survival games, kayaking and windsurfing are all part of the curriculum. For Ben-Ari, a devotee of extreme sports, it’s the sport element that has been critical to the program’s success because it fosters a great sense of strength and self confidence. The boys are also taught the importance of social service, by volunteer work with the elderly once a month. The idea for the center came while Ben-Ari was a student at the IDC. She tutored in an after-school program for troubled kids where she came to understand the needs of the children and the shortcomings of the municipally-funded center. What she saw was an often over-crowded, under-financed center unable to truly meet the needs of disadvantaged kids. Having identified the need, she explored the market, and with her skills and passions began conjuring up a solution to this local problem.

Advised by staff from the Sacta-Rashi Foundation, Ben-Ari built the project from the ground up, developing her model, creating a
budget, hiring staff, locating and renovating a building, and working with the city municipalities to make sure everything ran smoothly.

“At risk- youth can cause a lot of damage to society unless we can show them another way by empowering them and presenting them with a choice. We can show them that there is a way out- they can be better people and achieve great things”, says Ben- Ari. Providing a paradigm shift for the boys is what will nurture their future drive and determination for personal success. The center tries to provide a strong framework in their lives by working constantly with the boys’ schools and families.

In the afternoon session with the IDC students, the ultra-charismatic Merav Ben Ari provided us with the essential steps to achieving our own project goals: breaking it down into 4 steps,

1. **Money**: You can start your project without money. Ben Ari would have moved forward with her plans had she not had financial aid from the reality TV series, it would have just taken a few more years to achieve. Also, people want to give to social projects but sometimes cannot decide what the best place to donate their money is. When you are looking for startup capital and rely on the support of donors, first do the job their way then do it your way.

2. **Believe**: A common wisdom, but one that should be stressed- believe in yourself and have others believe in you. Don’t let discouragement stand in your way, especially if your project is concerned with something that is not necessarily your specialty. Other existing initiatives may be good but believe that you can do better. When people believe in you and your vision, then this can become your career.

3. **Dream**: If you don’t like your vision you can’t make it happen. Put yourself in the place you’re supposed to be in and live your passion. When brainstorming a project, it is ok to start with lofty goals or unreasonable expectations, choose everything as you like it. Write down all the details of your vision. As you go into the planning and implementation phase, that is where you must be more realistic. Sacrifices are an inevitable and necessary part of the social initiative creation process, but remember that you’re doing it because in the long run it will be better for your overall goals.

4. **Process**: Respect the process. If you don’t have immediate success, use your shortcomings as indicators of where you can improve. It is only through the process of hard work, long hours, and plenty of obstacles, that one
can truly become a great social entrepreneur.

We concluded our session at Derech Ha Etgar, as the young boys were returning from school and getting ready to do their homework with the volunteers (many of which are also students at the IDC). When reflecting on our meeting, one IDC MBA student remarked, “Merav is an amazing person, and we couldn't stop talking about her afterwards. I often wonder if I have the strength to risk everything for something I believe in, and it was encouraging and inspirational to hear the success story of someone like her.” The trip was a clear success, and was a strong motivator for those students who are considering the establishment of their own social outreach programs.

The **Social Entrepreneurial Forum Herzliya**, acts as a liaison, which bridges Israeli and international students from the IDC Herzliya with networks of social innovators from a variety of professional fields. The Forum seeks to develop the creativity that exists within every human being, through inspirational lectures and encounters. Once the spark is ignited, the Forum aids students in the materialization of their unique visions through traditional and progressive means. Meetings such as the recent one Merav Ben Ari are a crucial part of the program, showing how former students have transformed their ideals for a better world into reality.

Please join us for our April 26 on-campus event with Israel's environmental mastermind, Professor Alon Tal, from 12:00-1:30 in room S2 of the Library. For more information please e-mail ostrovregina@gmail.com