

Originally posted on YNET, Israel, 3.5.2020

“I got out of the streets and I started pursuing my dreams.”

Shiri Sharon Zeid found herself living on the streets at 16. Luckily, she met ELEM's Outreach Van which, to her, was the light at the end of the tunnel. Today, at 21 years old, standing on her own two feet, her biggest dream is to come full circle and open a hostel for at-risk youth. “ELEM is my family,” she says.

Written by Katia Aginov.

“For years I forgot who I even was. I was just done. A dead soul in a shell of a body.” These painful words, that might make one shudder, are said to us by Shiri Sharon Zeid. She found herself on the street at 16. Fortunately, she came across the ELEM Outreach Van, which to her was the light at the end of the tunnel. Today, at 21, she's in a totally different place. As an ELEM alum (of the Or Yehuda Outreach Van,) she feels, now strong and empowered, that she can share and speak of where she used to be.

[Click here to watch the video.](#)

“I was always the odd one out, a weirdo, fat and also very quiet.” She tells us about being shunned at school as a young kid. Home wasn't “the safe space everyone says it is” either. She started avoiding home at 15, spending her days and nights elsewhere, until she finally left altogether when she was 16 and scared.

Shiri stayed with a friend at first, but after six weeks she moved on, this time to the street for real. She found herself sleeping at a different place every night, at friends', on the street, and sometimes with random men. “It's an unhealthy environment,” she says. “During that time there was a person who was close to me, took advantage of me and truly hurt me.” She was addicted to drugs between the ages of 14-16, but she says the hardest part was actually the alcohol, an addiction that she has been fighting until recently.

She came across the ELEM Or Yehuda Outreach Van four years ago, and a strong bond was formed between her and the staff. Shiri informs us that she wasn't “easy to handle” at first, but the van's supervisor and volunteers fought for her. They helped her open up and taught her to ask for help.

They're also the ones who helped her out of the aforementioned unhealthy relationship. ELEM also helped her get a spot at an at-risk shelter when she was 17. "Suddenly I had a home," she says, moved. She also kept coming to the van which she still refers to as "my safe space."

The Street Work Field at ELEM helps 10,000 youths, young men, and women per year, with the help of Outreach Vans in 25 different cities and towns across the country. From Sderot in the south, all the way to Safed in the north. ELEM's vans' staff reach the youth at their turfs – public parks, squares, clubs, sports courts, hidden nooks, and more. The teams meet the youths who roam (and sometimes live on) the streets, they create relationships with them and support them, with the goal of helping them to start a process of creating positive changes in their lives. In the last year alone, ELEM managed to help 1200 youths who were on the verge of dropping out, find their way back to a well and fitting education establishments.

The van arrives during the evening hours. At the beginning of each evening, it arrives at a permanent spot. The team creates a comfortable place to sit, serves hot beverages and snacks, shares pages with information, and more. They meet the youth in an open and warm atmosphere, hold one-on-one conversations or group setups. During the second half of the evening and into the night, a special team members of the van staff walks around the city, locates youth who need help, and start a conversation with them. The goal is to give them access to the appropriate services and fitting therapy professionals, in order to set them back on a normative, supportive path.

Omer Shaked, who's been volunteering with the van for the last four years recalls: "Shiri was one of the first teenagers I met at ELEM. She was a punk," he smiles. "We really loved her but there was always something going on. There was always something energetic about her."

Shiri enlisted and has recently completed her service. She spent the past year working as a youth counselor, and these days she holds two jobs in security and has many dreams for the future. In a year from today she'd love release her first lecture, start helping people achieve their goals, and teach them how to let their pasts go. And yes, she's also thinking long term – her biggest dream is to open a hostel for youth at-risk, and with that, come full circle.

"These days I'm experiencing the best time of my life," Shiri summarizes with confidence. "Now, after my release from the army, I'm still in touch with the people who were there with me during those tough years. They were the ones who gave me the support I needed, provided a home and a family. They

accepted me for who I was, with everything I had to offer. Today, I want to continue with what I learned from these special people. I'm proud of what I accomplished, and if to end on a one amazing note about ELEM, I'd say that these people are my family."