

Originally posted on Maariv, Israel, 1/6/2020

His fist saved him: A youth in distress who became an athlete and an actor

Yaron grew up with a father who was a drug addict, and dropped out of school. But thanks to boxing he managed to rebuild his life. He later joined ELEM's theater program and became a successful actor.

Yaron (23) grew up in northern Israel, in a complicated, religious household. His father was heavily addicted to drugs, and the situation at home made Yaron drop out of school. He spent his days getting into fights and taking part in criminal activities. And then came the moment when it all changed, and he remembers it as if it was yesterday. From being a deprived youth, a petty criminal, he became a bit of a star.

“One day I tried to steal a motorcycle,” he recalls. “And an older man caught me in the act and said to me ‘you either come with me, or I call the cops.’ I went with him to a shelter and I saw a group of teens training, boxing. That same man said “I can either call the police and report your attempted theft, or you can start training here for me.’ I decided to jump on the opportunity and channel the violence elsewhere.” Later on Yaron became the Israeli champion for youth boxing. Twice.

Don't be fooled by the rough exterior, Yaron has always dreamed to perform on stage. At age 14 he first heard of an ELEM project that included a theater program. "At first I didn't feel like it was the right place for me because many other problematic kids attended the program for reasons other than loving theater," he explains.

"The longer I stayed, the program helped me open up, and the combination of acting and the support I got from ELEM helped me change the reality of my life. The goal of the program was to create a play that featured all of our real-life, personal stories, to take us, the "problematic kids," and help us release our deepest feelings. It was a long process that bonded us. I'm still in touch with some of the friends I made there to this day."

Even though things were rough at home, when it was time to enlist, Yaron's willpower allowed him to join a combat unit, and even become a commander. Once he finished his service, he was accepted to a theater studies program. He graduated a few months ago and has been part of the Library Theater Company ever since.

Last night, Yaron shared his touching story, but this time in a packed theater in Tel Aviv, as part of ELEM's annual gala. The event featured, as it does every year, notable talents like Rita and Eli Yatzpan, in addition to proud alumni of the organization's programs.

"The fist was my turning point," Yaron says. "That was the moment when I said, yeah, I can break that glass ceiling hanging over my head. The glass ceiling of the problematic kid, who never succeeds in anything, who's always thrown to the

side. You re-experience that feeling when you realize that there's a packed theater out there, and that those people came only for you."