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## **“When she started believing in us, something opened up.”**

A.'s father was extremely violent towards her mother, who in turn took it out on A. and her sister. A. dropped out of school, transferred from one establishment to another, and eventually found herself homeless, spending every night in the beds of strangers who exploited her. She suffered from depression and loneliness, but then she found a loving home at Alma, an ELEM program. “We’re here for any young woman on the street who needs a place to sleep, take a break, or get support.”

Written by Yarden Shaked.

When A.'s father constantly beat her mother when A. was a young girl, she was there to witness it all. Now, at 23, A. is dreaming about rehabilitating her life, and live normally. But she still recalls the nightmares and anxieties caused by the violence she saw at home. Down the line, her mom started beating her and her sister, as well.

As a young girl, A. mostly stayed at home alone, and at a very young age, she also had to wait for the neighbor to come and pick her up from kindergarten, because no one else would show. “The expectation that mom will show to pick me up, that anyone at all will remember me, still causes abandonment anxiety to this day.”

Click [here](#) to watch the touching video featuring A., and Tamari Movsovic, one of Alma's supervisors.

A. always felt belittled and invisible at school and other establishments. “I was shy, lonely, and afraid. I was scared of friendships, of people, and of any sort of a relationship and physical touch, and I always felt alone, all throughout the years.” This led to her dropping out of school. She became a problematic student with low grades, and she started bouncing between different establishments – special school for kids with behavioral problems, a boarding school, a therapy project for dropouts, and more. At the same time, she started developing anxiety attacks, depression, and suicidal thoughts.

A. found herself on the street, moving from one place to the next, and occasionally spending the night at the homes of strangers who took advantage of her. She started hanging out with many men, spent

hours at parks, passing the time and drinking. She roamed gardens and streets for most of the day, and when she went back home she would be humiliated and verbally abused by those around her.

At that point in time, her sister introduced her to Alma, an ELEM program for young women and teenagers at extreme risk. A. decided to try her luck and see if Alma would suit her.

“I came to Alma for the first time and the supervisor opened the door. The way she spoke to me was nice, and I got a good feeling before we even entered the place. The girls were just getting ready for dinner, and naturally, they invited me to join. At first, I sat there embarrassed, but the staff spoke to me, asked me questions, and encouraged me. I started telling them what I’ve been through. They listened patiently and with kind faces, and invited me to come again. I came back regularly.”

ELEM’s Alma program is serving young women and teenagers at extreme risk, who come from the background of commercial sexual exploitation. Alma is a collaboration between ELEM, the Petach Tikva municipality, and the Ministry of Welfare. Alma saves many young women every year.

Tamari Movsovhich, an Alma supervisor, tells us about her initial meeting with A. She describes a shy, suspicious girl who then slowly opened up once she gained trust in the program and its staff. “Any young woman who’s at a risk, who needs a place to sleep at, a hot meal – we’re here.”

For A., Alma is where the change happened. Suddenly she’d found a home, and met lovely volunteers who mentored her through very rough processes. They were her shoulder to lean on, a 24/7 go-to. “At Alma I was empowered. Suddenly I started being mature, I was aware of my actions and responsible for them, for taking care of myself. Suddenly, I felt better about myself, and once I got to Alma, I felt happy and warm inside.”

A. and other girls from the program decided to create a film for International Women’s Day called “The Mask Film,” and in it they reveal themselves and are conveying a message. “It doesn’t matter how much violence and abuse a woman has experienced or even currently experiencing, she can still say no.” A. notes that she played a major part in the making of the film. The message, which was born out of the pain the girls have experienced, was powerful, honest, and real.

Today, A. is in a much better place. She’s strong, and she even managed to get a dream of hers come true – artistic dancing. “I aspire to keep going with the dancing, and mostly get to a place where I feel

like a normal person.” She wishes and waits for the day when she feels like a regular person with a normal routine. “I don’t know what I would have done without Alma,” she says. “I’ll never forget the first time the staff at Alma told me ‘you’re not alone.’”

## **ELEM saves lives**

ELEM saves hundreds of girls annually through Alma and additional centers run by the organization. This past year, ELEM helped 791 teenagers, young men and women, at extreme-risk. ELEM has eight centers across Israel that serve homeless young people who experience violence and sexual exploitation on the streets. Most of them ran away from violent households, and experienced sexual abuse in their childhood. They developed post-traumatic symptoms such as depression, suicidal inclinations, and addiction, and they’re forced to survive using dangerous strategies such as substance abuse, prostitution, and crime. For many of these young people, ELEM is a lifesaver.