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Woman of the Week: We called to hear what's up

Inbal Dor Kerbel, the CEO of ELEM, the nonprofit which assists at-risk youth, shares data from a new report which points at a large escalation in cases of depression, violence, and alcohol and drug use among youth during COVID.

Written by Dina Chalutz

Age: 48

Marital status: Married with three children (10, 12, 20)

Best advice you've ever gotten: "When I was considering the role of ELEM's CEO, a good friend told me 'don't hesitate. This will be the role of your life.' He was right."

Worst advice you've ever gotten: "One I gave myself. To stop having kids after my third one was born. Today I regret it."

What are the main findings of the report?

"We've found that youth are suffering from anxiety and depression 4.4 times more than in 2019, from violence at home 2.9 times more, from sexual violence 3.3 times more, and from violence online 2.5 times more. Cases of self-harm and eating disorders have multiplied, and alcohol and drugs consumption has increased by 2.7. The report is based on the 6517 youths we've assisted in the last 3 months."

Is this all due to COVID?

"COVID pushed them to the edge. When teenagers, at-risk or otherwise, went to school every day, to a youth movement, to a sports club, they were under the supervision of a meaningful adult in their lives. A teacher, a counselor, a guidance counselor. They had someone to turn to in times of distress. Now, no one sees them, not even their parents who, like the rest of us, are also worried about the pandemic. This increases the feelings of depression, anxiety, and loneliness."

What, as far as you're concerned, is the most significant, i.e. concerning finding?

“The rate of dropping out of school. According to the report, 16% of the youth we’ve assisted have dropped out. But this phenomenon is even worse, because there are many youths who don’t fall under the category of ‘at-risk,’ and are “covertly” dropping out. We all think “schools are opening again,” but these youths come to school once, maybe twice a week, and the rest of the time they’re on zoom, if even that.”

How would you characterize the youth of ELEM?

“It goes beyond sectors. We have youth from Kiryat Shmona in the north, all the way to Eilat in the south. From wealthy cities and poor ones. Jews, Arabs, secular and orthodox. We serve an average of 21,000 youths annually.”

How do they find you?

“We’ve been around for 37 years. The youth know us, turn to us, and we find the rest ourselves, through our digital platforms, and on the streets with the help of our Outreach Vans.”

What signs are there for emotional or mental distress?

“Everything that is out of the ordinary should be a red flag: irritation, aggression, sadness, raising one’s voice, extreme weight gain or loss, doing badly at school, hiding in one’s room or the opposite – spending hours outside.”

What are the next steps once you recognize that there’s an issue?

“Don’t be ashamed to reach out for help. You can reach out to ELEM, to a welfare worker, to a counselor at school, as long as you don’t ignore it. Sometimes parents avoid having conversations with their adolescent children, because things are already tense at this age and the parents try to avoid additional arguments. But we can’t ignore things and hope they’ll go away on their own. It’s important to show interest, not in order to admonish, but in order to learn, and help.”

How did you become the CEO of ELEM?

“I grew up in Kibbutz Ein Shemer, I studied education and management, and I joined ELEM 15 years ago to launch a few social businesses for law-breaking youth. We created a few of these businesses, like a

coffee shop in Sderot, or a thrift store in Jerusalem, operated by the youth. Five years after that I became the vice CEO, and five years ago I became the CEO.”

How does ELEM fund the different services you offer?

“Obviously, this year, the need for our services grew exponentially because of COVID, while we saw a large decrease in donations. All the means of donations engagement that we’ve used in the past, like a marathon, and a national donation day, weren’t possible this year. Which is why we launched our Ambassadors Campaign, and we enlisted all of our employees and volunteers, and asked them to talk to their own circles and ask for donations. The goal is to raise 5 Million NIS (Over \$1.5 Million – ELEM USA) within two weeks. If we can’t make it, I’ll have to make some tough calls and shut down some of our 80 projects.”