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This story is presented with the intention to raise awareness and provide information about ELEM's work.

"We Saw Our Friends Shot": The Volunteers Who Were at the Nova Recapture the Moments of Horror

Nine ELEM volunteers arrived at the "Nova" outdoor rave party on October 7th to support partygoers when help was needed. Three of them were murdered in the terror attack. Now, the team members who survived hell go back to the moments of horror.

Written by Dudi Fatimer

For over a decade, the "Good People" program, an initiative of ELEM's (an NGO for youth at risk) Street Work Field has been providing on-the-ground assistance at outdoor rave parties for youth and young people in moments of distress or crisis, following, among other reasons, the consumption of mind-altering substances, and to prevent incidents of violence, sexual abuse and more.

The volunteers in the program, real angels, are professionals - therapists from a variety of different fields such as psychology or social work, who go to parties around the country and provide partygoers with emotional and mental help, while creating a safe space where the partygoers can get help when needed. The work is being done in collaboration with medical teams, producers and security, including the Israeli Police.

"The program was launched in 2011 and was developed at ELEM, which goal is to meet with teenagers and young men and women, due to the need and realization that outdoor rave parties are full of such youth, and this is a link between the Outreach Van program and the outdoor rave scene," explains Moshe Elad, manager of the "Good People" program at ELEM.

"I attended dozens of parties; both small underground parties and what seemed like small productions. I saw extreme situations, those affected by anxiety following the use

of substances or even without using. We distribute water and create a safe space which is a spot where there are as few stimuli as possible, where we get to know the partygoers, listen to them and support them. I first encountered this program as a partygoer, and we are a team that is part therapists and part people who come with a desire to support young men and women who are in the outdoor rave scene. We have been working for many years with all kinds of different productions and our program is well known in this scene. We usually go out to one to two events a month and our volunteers specialize in this, in getting to know the people, being with them and giving them assistance and continuous support."

"Helping Under Fire"

On October 7th, during the outdoor rave festival "Nova" in Kibbutz Re'im, Elad took on the role of manager of the "Good People" program for the first time and replaced the outgoing manager, Maayan Shenkar Braunstein, who held this position for five years. "This was the party I started serving as a manager. This was supposed to be Maayan's last party and my first party. Passing the baton."

Nine team members from the program went to that party, including Elad and Shenkar Braunstein. "We arrived at the festival on Friday at 7:00 PM; we set up our safe space. It was an event that was expected to have 4,000 attendees. We started making rounds at night, and around sunrise we were all supposed to wake up and start the activity. According to the records, the party was supposed to start on Friday at 10:00 PM and end on Saturday at 4:00 PM of the following day. Our work requires sunrise so that we can see where we are and create the space. For me, this is the fourth I have attended Nova as part of this program."

At 6:30 AM they woke up to the sound of rockets and alarms. "As soon as we woke up to the sound of the rockets, we split into teams, some of us helped people who were under the influence of mind-altering substances and the experience of the rockets was difficult for them, and some of us loaded the equipment back on the van," Elad recalls. "I loaded the equipment into the vehicle along with some of the volunteers. We started to leave the compound with two vans."

"I realized that there were also terrorists when a truck with terrorists came in front of us. It took me a while to understand the situation. We were driving the van, we saw that there was a traffic jam; we decided to stop on the side of the road and see what was going on. On the way we were approached by people who joined us in the van, then we got on the road and started driving. In front of us, was a pickup truck with Kalashnikovs and RPGs, so we decided to turn around and drive the other way, towards Be'eri, and then we started hearing gun shots. We realized that it was both behind us and in front of us, so we decided to stop the vehicles and run away. That's when I realized I was in the

middle of a terrorist attack," he said.

"When we realized that it was just rockets, it felt like a game, it looked like fireworks and it didn't feel like it was close by, and we believed that everything would be fine," says Shenker Braunstein. "After the missiles, we heard shots, and people started to running away and then I realized that the danger was closer, and it was really close when the terrorists were in front of our vehicle and started shooting, and we had to run away from the vehicle. I realized it was close when I saw two of our volunteers, Lior and Sigal, shot and lifeless. They came to rescue us around 3 PM and then came again around 4 PM. At first we were evacuated to a gas station and from there to Ofakim, and in retrospect I realized that Ofakim was also not a safe place."

"During the event I saw, in a very powerful way, the significance and meaning of "Good People," and I saw my volunteers on the ground, in action in this chaos, helping people when there were shots fired around and there was a real risk to their lives, and it created this internal safe space," she shared. "Once you manage to feel stable within, then you can help a lot more people peacefully. I have a lot of memories of Lior and Sigal that are related to the party and many shared parties. We are a family, and one of the significant things we did after this event was to meet with all the volunteers, even those who were supposed to come to the party and didn't, and the support for each other feels like we're a family. This is one of the things that heals me in all of this. We, the folks who survived the party, undergo group therapy, in addition to the individual therapy that each and every one of us undergoes."

Of the nine "Good People" volunteers who came to the party - three were murdered and did not return: Lior Haddad Atias Z"l and Sigal Levy Z"l, who were found shot near the van on that same Saturday, and Yonatan Richter Z"l, who was declared missing for several days, until his body was located. "Sigal was amazing, and worked at ELEM for many years and at Branco Weiss School and with at-risk youth, helping the community and supporting youth. She joined us and very quickly understood what needed to be done at the party, and during Saturday morning she helped people who went through difficult experiences", says Elad.

"For Lior, this was her fourth party with us. She originally came to know us as a partygoer and very quickly understood what we were doing and joined to help other partygoers. She was a veterinary nurse. Yonatan was with the program for two years, and people always felt comfortable talking to him and opening up to him. He came to our world from the outdoor rave scene. It is very painful to lose friends who came to do good and help. I've seen people in the most extreme situations, but I've never encountered scenes like the ones I saw at this party, during this horrible massacre," he shared.

"Sigal came to my house and we headed out the party together," recalls Adam Barel, a

volunteer of the "Good People" program who was at the party. "We picked up Lior on the way, and it just so happened that out of all the parties we volunteered at, this was perhaps the party where there were the most opportunities for the three of us to connect in a significant way, and this also manifested in some very personal, deep conversations we had about life. Every partygoer who came to this party as well as others, received such a personal and caring treatment from Lior, which made people tell her their life stories and find in her a soul-sister for life. Yonatan and I had our inside jokes at this event, and we got even closer at this party."

Barel recalled that the evening before the disaster, he heard a security briefing in which procedures were explained in the event of rocket fire. "I saw that they did a briefing for the security forces and since I take interest in what happens behind the scenes, I listened in the back so as not to disturb and I listened to what they were talking about," he says. "They talked about sensible things like dealing with cases of violence, and the security director also briefed them on how to conduct themselves if there were missiles, in the sense of shutting down the party and getting everyone out through the emergency gates. It sounds strange and absurd to me because I didn't think it could happen. I went to bed at 4 in the morning, and I was woken up at 6:30 AM by the missiles, and since I heard the briefing, my brain already knew what the security response would be, and I think in some way I was prepared for such a procedure."

"During the attack, there was a spot for our team to go to and see what was happening with the people, to support them, accompany them and do the job for which we came. Even while we fled the area we helped people. There were constant bursts of gunfire that we heard and we didn't figure it out, but at some point someone showed me a post that Hatzel [a social media influencer - ELEM USA] had published on Facebook in which he wrote that there were terrorists in Sderot and an attempt to take over the city, and there my mind began to understand that we were in the midst of a big and unusual event. At a certain point, when they were closing in on us from all sides, I ran into Maayan and Moshe, who also ran away, and then near the van we saw our friends, Sigal and Lior, shot," Barel recalled. "My cellphone remained in the field, and throughout the day I communicated through my watch, which also has a SIM card, and that's how I succeeded in keeping in touch with my team and also to let the partygoers talk to their families."

"Being There for Them"

"On October 7th, ELEM found itself in the line of fire, when our team from the 'Good People' program was on duty at a party in Re'im, and three beloved and dedicated volunteers were murdered," notes Tali Erez, ELEM-Israel's CEO. "In the past year, the Ministry of National Security joined the initiative and today the program works as a joint venture. It is important to note that starting that Shabbat, and until today, thousands of

youth have become at-risk youth. As early as the third day of the war, we've been on the ground, in the evacuation areas of the Gaza Envelope evacuees and created Breathing Spaces, informal spaces for those youth who experienced the horrors and needed someone to be with them to restore normality, to strengthen the belief that it will get better, to hold onto life. Today, in collaboration with the Ministry of Welfare, we operate 15 such spaces."

Our conversation is taking place while Elad, Barel, and Shenker Braunstein are attending the unveiling of the tombstone of Lior Haddad Atias Z"l at the Marmurek Cemetery in Rechovot, and while they are in the stages of individual and group therapy for the trauma, I must dare to ask them if they plan to come back and volunteer at the next rave parties?

Barel: "For me, this event made me understand mine and our meaning, and I thought, when I hid, what I would be remembered for after I die and that gave me the energy to carry on with it. There is difficulty and we will deal with it, but I want to be connected and continue to do this role, to do good and be there for the partygoers, that is our goal."

Elad: "People understood the importance of "Good People" even before the tragedy, but now we receive more and more requests from people who want to volunteer, because apparently this tragedy brought the importance of the organization to the wider public. I believe that parties will always happen and we will continue this activity because it is a calling. This is our youth, our future. Our goal is to bring in light and not let the darkness defeat us. I evolved with this project so I know it can hurt, both before and after this event. It has a very big impact on us and what we experience as a country and as a society."

Shenkar Braunstein: "It's hard for me to know, I don't yet know exactly how this event will affect me. I know that I have a very strong feeling and desire to see this program continue to grow. Beyond this entire event that happened, the program has a very strong foundation and beyond the event we went through, there is going to be a very large wave of parties and of youth who will use substances and there is great importance and significant need for this program to be there for them and support them. I believe it will take us some time to process what happened, but we are aiming to go back and help youth and anyone who needs our help and embrace."