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149080 ונצ'רט ד"ר אטטורה מודנה - שותף מנהל בקרן טרה ונצ'ר -					



STUDENTS TAKE part in one of Machshava Tova's technology workshops. (Courtesy)

Paying it forward in the Start-Up Nation

• DAVID BRUMMER

Israel's global preeminence as the Start-Up Nation is a marvel of the modern world. However, even the most basic technological know-how and knowledge has not been spread evenly across the nation... until now.

Established in 2003, Machshava Tova (A Good Thought) was initially set up to help advance computer knowledge in the most disadvantaged populations of Jerusalem, the brainchild of Terra Venture Partners managing director Dr. Astorre Modena. He was struck by the glaring disparity, in spite of geographical proximity, of the Venture Capital hi-tech world he worked in and the technologically and economically challenged areas of the Talpiot neighborhood.

"I would have meetings with top entrepreneurs of the hi-tech world and when I crossed the street it was almost like being in the developing world. People there had almost no access to the Internet or computers," he said.

Machshava Tova, managed by Ornit Ben-Yashar, started its first six or seven years as a Jerusalem-based project but slowly expanded to Lod and to other parts of the country over the last few years – though the organization is still headquartered in the capital. At its outset, the tech venture sought to teach basic computing to young people in disadvantaged areas, which in turn led to some surprising and uplifting outcomes.

"We now have 60 to 70 courses," said Modena, "including Android programming and robotics. We are now beyond the stage where there is a need for just basic computer skills."

One of the defining aspects of Machshava Tova is that it is not an organization that deals simply with technology, it also take a more holistic societal approach to the uses of technology and how it can function as a source of cohesion. What also makes the organization special is the way in which it bridges divides, bringing together youngsters from across religious, language and cultural divides.

"We work with kids looking for inspiration and motivation," Modena said. "They need motivation to come and learn and succeed. It does not matter

where the community is or who they are – we work with the whole population."

This ability to cut across divides was highlighted only a week or so ago, when the organization held a large event and sitting together in the crowd were boys and girls, secular people, haredim and Arabs.

The Eco-tech project, one of Machshava Tova's main programs, acquires computers for kids in deprived areas and empowers participants with the technical skills to build a computer and fix any problems. Once the computer is in working condition, the youngsters themselves decide to whom to give the computers, proving to be a highly successful entrepreneurship model. There are around 16 projects throughout the country, and this program recently won the Youth Entrepreneurship in Need tournament for the second time. As a result, a cohort of youngsters from Lod will be sent to New York City to represent Israel in an international competition.

The Machshava Tova centers become focal points of the community; through hard work and patience, they become deeply ingrained. It is not a given, however, that every community will accept the organization in its midst. Working in some chronically disadvantaged areas, this nonprofit is determined to succeed where many other organizations have failed. It took time for Machshava Tova to be accepted in many of the areas in which it tried to work and for local residents in those deprived areas to gain confidence in it. They wanted assurances that it would not be another here-today-gone-tomorrow type of outfit, where good intentions would not be enough to support the work that needed to be carried out.

Ben-Yashar discussed the nonprofit's focus on depth of participation. Its model is relatively simple; it recruits people to volunteer and work who have a strong, positive attitude; who are good with people; and who are proficient enough – even though they may not be technological wizards. A key strength of the organization is that it sees the potential of its participants and is able to look beyond the immediate focus of any technological needs.

"We focus on quality, not quantity of service," said Ben-Yashar. "Our courses last for six to 12 months, and for each of the approximately 3,500

students per year, we try and give each one of them confidence for the next steps in their lives."

One aspect of the project's success is the way it has extended beyond its initial aim of closing the opportunity gap for school-age youngsters. The organizers realized that although the program started with the youth, very quickly many other family members also wanted to become involved and be exposed to computers and technology.

"We had a major impact," said Ben-Yashar. "We saw that brothers, sisters and then parents – in fact, the whole community – wanted to participate."

Modena added, "We are really present in the community, and sometimes because we are in the middle of it, we find that there is a need that we did not know previously existed." Machshava Tova aims to be as flexible as possible, tailoring and molding itself to local needs to be able to provide the community with the best and most adaptable service.

"We learn from each of the different communities and see what works where," said Modena. "We sort of crowd-source ideas from different communities."

Ben-Yashar discussed the metrics used to measure the project's efficacy.

"We try to measure our success using two pointers: knowledge and effectiveness. We take a zoomed-out view, a before-and-after snapshot of a person's project work, which can show them how much they have achieved. In the second instance, we measure how fully a student has learned to use their new-found skills."

Both Modena and Ben-Yashar are proud of Machshava Tova's work and see its positive impact as a boon for society.

"We want to teach kids technology," said Modena, "but we also want them to be an active and helpful part of the community – not just to take all the time, but also give back." For Ben-Yashar, there were many rewarding aspects of her work, which include "helping people so much and providing children with a better future or helping a woman find work or even seeing a haredi person sit in front of a computer for the first time. The magic of Machshava Tova – whether we are working in Arabic or Hebrew – is the wonderful gift of seeing of seeing how many people we can bring together."