

# ‘I wanted to do something’

Deerfield teen Ariel Oberfeld on summer as a counselor in Ukraine

**JEWISH OVERNIGHT CAMP** has been an important part of Ariel Oberfeld’s life for years. The Deerfield High School senior spent many summers at JCC Camp Chi in Wisconsin, connecting with Judaism and building lifelong friendships.

However, when Oberfeld’s father returned from visiting a Ukrainian refugee camp, he was inspired to hear about how meaningful the trip was and the importance of the work. “I wanted to do something, as well,” he said.

So, Oberfeld’s mother connected him with Rabbi Irina Gritsevskaya, who told him about Camp Ramah Yachad Ukraine. The camp, held near Chernivtsi at the Sun Valley Resort, welcomes children from regions under bombardment; many campers are refugees from territories now occupied from Russia. Sadly, many have lost friends and family in the war.

“It’s an amazing project that takes kids from all over Ukraine and brings them to a safe place to be together, have Jewish experiences, and get some Jewish education,” said Gritsevskaya, the camp’s director. “We also deal with a lot of post-trauma. Our approach is to create a bubble for kids to have safe and normal experiences, something that they can’t experience in their everyday lives.”

Oberfeld began by raising money for Camp Ramah Yachad Ukraine, but soon decided to become a counselor. “I wanted to actually experience the camp and help firsthand,” he said.

His parents, who are Ukrainian immigrants, were on board with their son’s decision. “I knew that this experience would be invaluable,” Oberfeld said. “My parents understood this, so they were very supportive; but they did call me every day to make sure everything was fine.”

“I remember Ariel told me, ‘If my parents didn’t leave on time, I could have definitely been one of these kids,’” Gritsevskaya added. “The connection between American Jews and Ukrainian Jews is strong. For many American Jews, this is part of their history.”



Perhaps the most important part of Oberfeld’s role was to make the campers’ summers fun. “I wasn’t there to try to be their psychologist,” he said. “I was there to just connect with them, play sports with them, and teach them about what it’s like to be an American and a Jew.”

“Ariel was willing to do everything that was needed in order to help,” Gritsevskaya recalled, adding that his sports background was especially valuable. “Sports connect hearts, no matter what language you speak. They are very unifying.”

Last summer, about a third of the camp’s counselors were Israelis with their war trauma, which brought an additional level of complexity and education to Oberfeld’s experience. “I did talk about the war with the other counselors, and many of them told me their stories,” he said. “Despite the fun ... they’re still living a life at war, and the Israelis were living two lives at war.”

While Oberfeld drew upon many of his experiences—babysitting, volunteering with JCC Chicago’s All-Star Abilities, and as a camper himself—to prepare for his time as a counselor, he admits that nothing could have readied him for the gravity of helping children navigate their summer experience amid war-time trauma.

“I knew it was going to be hard, but I adapted,” he said. ★

Pictured at left: Ariel Oberfeld serves as a judge at Camp Ramah Yachad Ukraine’s Maccabiah Games. Pictured above: Rabbi Irina Gritsevskaya leads *tefillah* (prayer) at Camp Ramah Yachad Ukraine. (Photos courtesy of Midreshet Schechter)

BY BRITTANY FARB GRUBER | Managing Editor

