

## Reeling them in

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Barry Davis , THE JERUSALEM POST

Ever feel you want to do something about a glaring injustice? Well if, like most of us, your initial burst of burning intent to "do something about it" is almost immediately doused by the prospect of doing battle with the gargantuan powers that be, take heart from a bunch of Jerusalem youngsters.

The teenagers in question are part of the neatly named AK-TV project run by the International Cultural and Community Center in the German Colony, and sponsored by the Jerusalem Foundation. The program, which started last year, has yielded two incisive and delightful documentaries.

The project incorporates a dozen ninth to 12th graders from around Jerusalem. The teenagers split into three teams, and set off initially to research and then to film their stories.

Mali Amar, 18, was part of the team that produced *We Came Up, Arrived and Got Stuck* (Alinu, Higanu, Nitkanu), which highlighted Mamilla Mall's lack of accessibility for people with physical disabilities.

"We went to the mall and we saw that the site wasn't entirely accessible to the physically disabled," explains Amar. "Entry to the parking lot, for example, is limited to vehicles under two meters high."

That proved to be a problem for Mali Ulman, who is confined to a wheelchair, and whose van is 2.14 meters high. The documentary shows Ulman having to park away from the mall, on the street.

And Ulman's problems didn't stop there. The mall's entrance for the disabled has yet to be completed so Ulman had to navigate her way through the underground parking lot, and the only way she could access the upper level of the mall was via a steep winding ramp which, as Ulman says in the film, is "not impassable but the angle is frightening."

And there was also the matter of restroom access. The only public convenience wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair is in a café, but there is no safety bar or other accessories required by the physically disabled.

After suffering the indignity of a crowd of onlookers following her attempts to get into the bathroom, Ulman finally gave up.

"I'll have to hang on," says Ulman eventually. "This is something that will prevent me from coming to the mall."

"There were a few less serious problems with the mall," says Amar. "But we decided to focus on the major difficulties."

Armed with a video camera, Amar and the team, together with wheelchair-bound Henia Schwartz and Ulman, and handicap accessibility expert Dr. Avi Ramot, set off to document the mall's accessibility

deficiencies.

Initially, the team did not get an overly enthusiastic response from mall managers. "We showed the film to the project manager there," Amar recalls. "He asked us to leave and said he now realized we were not as innocent as we looked."

At the end of the day, however, Amar and her pals got the result they wanted. "We kept on calling them to ask what they were doing about the situation and two months later they invited us to the mall to show us the new, fully equipped bathroom for disabled people, and they arranged temporary parking," she continues.

"They said they will sort out the parking problem, too. It was very encouraging. We may only be kids but we got things done."

Meanwhile, another AK-TV team set out to improve the service provided by Egged in Jerusalem.

"We asked Egged if they could put maps of the bus routes and timetables at the bus stops," says Tzofiah Siksik, 17, from Kiryat Arba who was part of the group that filmed *Is It Good that Egged's Got Its Hands on the Wheel?*, a play on the bus company's slogan. "They have them in Tel Aviv so why shouldn't they have them here?"

Although Siksik sees the "social benefit" of people communicating at bus stops, when they ask each other about bus times and routes, she says the information should be provided by the bus company. "People can talk about more interesting things than information about buses."

Siksik admits to having some initial doubts about the importance of the matter. "I wasn't sure we could make a difference by making a film about the problem with the buses. But one day I wanted to go to Hadassah Medical Center to visit friends of mine who had been injured in the terrorist attack in the Mercaz Harav Yeshiva, and I had a problem finding out about bus times and which buses went there," she recalls.

Convinced of the importance of bus information to the average Jerusalemite, Siksik and her colleagues set about interviewing a large number of Jerusalem bus users, of all ages and ilks.

They then confronted Egged and, eventually, chief transport engineer Pini Gershon with the results. "To begin with, the Egged customer service people didn't take us seriously," says Siksik. "We felt they thought we were just a bunch of annoying kids, but we kept at it and we never felt like giving up. The subject is too important to be ignored."

Eventually Siksik and her team obtained a guarantee from Gershon that the desired bus information would be provided at bus stops by January 2009.

"We really felt we'd achieved something," says Siksik. "But we're going to follow up on this. We want to make a difference."

The documentaries were recently screened at the Kagan Center in the Katamonim. The event was attended by Orly Vilnai-Federbush of Channel 2's *Civil Guard* consumer program.

Vilnai-Federbush was suitably impressed with the youngsters' efforts. "You've done great work," she told them. "We need more responsible TV like *Civil Guard*, and your documentaries are exactly what this country needs. Keep that sparkle in your eyes and never give up. This shows that youth can change things for the better."

*We Came Up, Arrived and Got Stuck* and *Is It Good that Egged's Got Its Hands on the Wheel?* will soon be available for viewing on the YouTube Web site.

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