

NGO provides 'mentor for life' for released lone soldiers

IDF graduates whose families are unavailable get practical help from businessmen over 35

• By DANIELLE ZIRI

"When lone soldiers get released, the army takes back their uniforms but not the loneliness," Itay Kanner often repeats this to the volunteers at his organization, Mentor for Life, which helps discharged lone soldiers by assigning them to a mentor who guides them in facing civilian life.

About 6,000 lone soldiers serve in the IDF at any given time. Each year about 2,000 are discharged after completing their military service.

Many of them then face tasks such as finding a job and a place to live and enrolling in school.

Itay Kanner founded Mentor for Life three years ago after realizing that little help was available for lone soldiers after they were discharged from the IDF.

"They need someone to guide them and help them make important decisions like where to study or how to find a job, since their parents aren't there to do that."

Forty percent of lone soldiers who belong to the

organization are in fact Israelis, but either they are orphans or they do not have the support of their families for reasons ranging from disagreements to abuse and violence.

"What happens is they get out of the army and they need to find a job so they can pay for rent and for the basics. So they find a small job. But then they can't go and study because that means cutting down on shifts and earning less money that they need to live," Kanner said, "the best word to describe them is probably survivors, they are real survivors." he added.

The mentor's job is to help in decision-making, to encourage, support, listen and assist with bureaucratic issues such as taxes, bank accounts, rental leases, bill paying and dealing with cell phone companies.

Mentors have to be at least 35 years old, experienced business executives or business owners, and have completed military service. Through the use of questionnaires, the organization tries

to match the soldiers to a mentor who shares his or her hobbies or interests. To date, 100 matches have been made.

Dani Ben-Ishai, who works in hi-tech, became a mentor about two years ago, and has been with Israeli lone soldier 23-year-old Tzvika Koifman since his release from the military.

Ben-Ishai said that rather than solving problems for Koifman, he tries to give him the tools to solve them himself.

"When he was hesitating between two schools to apply to, I drove him to both colleges and we met with people there to hear more about the programs," Ben-Ishai said.

"He asked them questions that I didn't even think about," Koifman said, remembering the visits. "At the beginning our relationship was awkward. I didn't want to bother him and I was thinking should I call or not? Is it too late? But now that awkwardness is gone. [Dani] is something between a close friend and a teacher to me," Koifman said, "I was at his house for many holidays, we

don't live close, but when I can, I go."

Ben-Ishai also helped Koifman search for scholarships to finance his four years of study in engineering at Rupin College, which he starts next month.

"It brings me a tremendous amount of satisfaction because I feel that I'm helping and I see the change in him," Ben-Ishai said. "He used to think a lot about short term solutions like how to save 20 shekels, now he thinks more about the long term."

"The first mission is for [Tzvika] to finish his studies, but after that I want to try to talk to him about subjects like building a family, finding a good job and someday buying a house," Ben-Ishai said.

According to Mentor For Life's terms, the mentor is required to accompany the discharged lone soldier for five years, but both Ben-Ishai and Koifman agreed that their relationship will continue further.

"I see him as a son," said Ben-Ishai, "I will help him and listen to him for as long as he wants my help."