

Around the community

JNF AUSTRALIA

Helping Sha'ar HaNegev vision come to fruition

AJN STAFF

A CORNERSTONE-LAYING ceremony was held on May 14 to mark the beginning of construction of an innovation and sustainability centre in southern Israel's Sha'ar HaNegev – a joint initiative of JNF Australia, KKL-JNF and the regional council.

The event was attended by head of the Sha'ar HaNegev Regional Council Uri Epstein, representatives from JNF Australia and KKL-JNF and Vered Liebshtein, the widow of the late regional council head Ofir Liebshtein.

Located adjacent to Sderot's central train station and spanning almost 10,000 square metres, the innovation centre will house dozens of start-ups and established high-tech companies, creating hundreds of jobs.

Construction is led by the

regional council's Economic Development Company with major support from JNF Australia, whose generous contribution made the NIS 30 million project possible.

The first building is expected to be completed by the end of 2026.

The centre will also serve as home to start-ups from SouthUp – Sha'ar HaNegev's tech incubator, which currently supports 25 companies in various sectors.

The initiative was originally spearheaded by Liebshtein, who tragically lost his life on October 7, 2023 while defending his kibbutz, Kfar Aza.

The centre was central to his vision of advancing innovation and employment in the region.

Planning and permit processes were initiated before the attack and now that vision is coming to life.

Epstein said, "This is a cen-



From left: JNF NSW shlichah Sarah Vanunu, JNF Australia board member Pam Krail, JNF Australia CEO Doron Lazarus, KKL-JNF CFO Yuval Yenni, JNF Australia board member Les Rosenfeld, Uri Epstein and JNF Australia past president Peter Smaller.
Photo: Yakir Assido

tral milestone in our vision to make Sha'ar HaNegev a magnet for innovation, entrepreneurship and high-tech".

"Our heartfelt thanks go to our partners and friends at JNF

Australia and KKL-JNF here in Israel.

"While our hearts are still heavy and we long for the return of every hostage, we are also committed to looking forward ... building

not just recovery, but long-term prosperity.

"This initiative is expected to create a technological anchor, generate hundreds of new jobs, retain the younger generation in Sha'ar HaNegev and attract entrepreneurs and companies from central Israel to come here."

Members of a JNF Australia mission that attended the centre's cornerstone-laying ceremony also spent the week visiting other communities, facilities and projects in the Gaza envelope area that are directly benefiting from donated funds.

These include the Hagiva School in Ofakim – which has its first ImagineBox education resource for healing and creativity – a serenity garden at Soroka Medical Centre, Rishpon Healing Space, moshavim Ein Habasor and Netiv Ha'Asara, and kibbutzim Yad Mordechai, Zikim and Sufa.

RURAL FIRE SERVICE

Father and daughter happy to help

SHANE DESIATNIK

DURING National Volunteers Week, Jewish Sydneysider Noel Kessel and his daughter Liorah celebrated their nearly 45 years of combined service as Rural Fire Service (RFS) volunteers.

Noel first joined the Cottage Point brigade in the summer of 1986-87 and has since been in crews that train there and in Warringah, that have been dispatched to countless firefighting shifts across the state, including during the devastating 2019-20 bushfires that swept north, west and south of Sydney.

More than five years ago, Liorah – a 2024 Kesser Torah College HSC graduate – joined the Northern Beaches District RFS cadets training program and recently became a cadets brigade deputy captain and instructor.

"It's a lot of fun to be a volunteer firefighter, but it's also a lot of responsibility and commitment at the same time," Noel told *The AJN*.



Northern Beaches District RFS volunteer firefighters Noel Kessel and his daughter Liorah.

"Liorah loves it and as a father, I always kind of try to look out for her, but she rightly tells me to back off a bit," he added with a smile.

"She knows what she's doing."

Noel said that being an RFS volunteer for so long "feels as rewarding as ever and the camaraderie is so great".

"In the end and as Liorah says, being a volunteer firefighter is a

good opportunity to give back to the community, help to protect lives and property and make a difference in people's lives.

"And it's not just bushfires and hazard reduction that firefighters deal with, but also assisting with search and rescue operations, medical emergencies, car fires and helping communities hit by major storms and floods."

ARAVA AUSTRALIA
Sapir to steer partnership

THE Arava Australia Partnership officially welcomed Keren Sapir (pictured right) as its new director last week, while thanking Rabbi Adam Berman (left) for his contributions in the role for almost the past three years.

Sapir brings exceptional experience as the former education director for Hevel Eilat Regional Council and has a deep connection to the Arava region and an international outlook.

The future of the partnership is bright as it continues to build meaningful connections between the Central Arava in Israel's vast Negev desert and the Australian Jewish community.

The partnership's most recent heartwarming project saw IDF soldiers and reservists from the Arava region receive beautiful gift packs for Yom Ha'atzmaut, through the involvement of volunteers from both the Arava and Australia.

Each package included greeting cards featuring original artwork by artists Lani Kay from Sydney, Roanne Treves from Perth and Mandy Hildebrand from Melbourne. The gift packs also had T-shirts inspired by the stunning Arava landscapes, handmade ceramic hamsas and homemade treats baked with love.

Led by the Arava Community Centre, this initiative was proudly supported by the Zionist Federation of Australia and the Arava Australia Partnership.



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