

LONG ISLAND JewishWorld

A Life-Giving Force

Koby Mandell's memory aids terror victims

By WALTER RUBY

Sometimes in life, personal crises or tragedies occur to individuals or families that leave them with a stark choice: either rise to the occasion and adopt a more ethical and engaged way of living, or collapse into despondency.

Rabbi Seth Mandell and his wife, Sherri, faced that harsh test in May 2001. Their 13-year-old son, Ya'acov, known to family and friends as Koby, was abducted by Palestinian terrorists while on a hike near his home in Tekoah on the West Bank. Koby and his friend, Yosef Ishran, were beaten to death with rocks.

Seth Mandell was in New York recently to help with preparations for the second annual Koby Mandell Foundation dinner, to be held November 28 in Manhattan. "There is no way a person can be the same as he or she was after such a thing," he said in an interview. "You are forced to become a better person or to become something less.

"Sherri and I didn't want our other three children to say, 'They gave up.' We realized that if we wanted to remain effective parents to our children we had to do something that would give Koby's life and death meaning for ourselves and others. We had to do something that would take the cruelty of Koby's murder and transform it into kindness."

What the Mandells did was create Camp Koby, a free summer camp for children ages 6-19 who have lost siblings or parents in terrorist attacks. Camp Koby opened with 200 campers in 2002 and had some 600 this year. In addition to a main summer session, the camp offers follow-up reunions during the year and an ongoing Big Sister /Big Brother program.

In addition to the camp, the Koby Mandell Foundation now supports such programs as a mothers' healing retreat, family healing retreats and young adult encounter programs, all for close relatives of victims of terrorism. The foundation's annual operating budget is approximately \$1.7 million.

At the dinner, Willie Randolph, manager of the N.Y. Mets, will receive the Koby Mandell Humanitarian Award. Camp Koby Director Reuven Angstreich, who is also executive director of the foundation's Israeli operations, will receive its Distinguished Service Award. Master of ceremonies will be noted defense attorney Benjamin Brafman.

Todd Sukol, executive director of the foundation's American operations, said he expects the dinner to draw some 500 people and raise up to \$500,000. The first \$150,000 will go toward healing programs for families in the Galilee who lost loved ones in last summer's Lebanon War.

"I got involved after meeting Seth Mandell at a friend's home," recalled Martin Scharf of Lawrence, who is co-chairing the dinner with his wife, Melodie, and with Lee and Cheryl Lasher of Englewood, N.J. "After hearing his explanation as to what his foundation is all about — mending broken lives, broken families and broken hearts — I



Koby Mandell with his parents, Seth and Sherri. Koby was 13 when he and a friend were kidnapped by Palestinians and beaten to death with rocks.

are able to help your own loved ones and others cope with the tragedy confronting them."

Koby's mother, Sherri, grew up in East Rockaway and became a journalist and writer in Israel. She published a book on Koby's death, *The Blessing of the Broken Heart*, and is now at work on another volume.

"After Koby's tragedy, Seth and I had a lot of support, with many friends in Tekoah who stayed with us and weren't afraid of helping us deal with the pain we were facing," Sherri said in a separate telephone interview from Jerusalem. "What we soon realized, however, was that our children did not have the same level of support that we did."

Koby's siblings, Daniel, Eliana and Gavi, were 12, 10 and 6 at the time of his death, and his mother said, "Children become the silent victims in the family. Indeed, they lose their standing as children because they see evil in the world and realize their parents

couldn't protect them. Most kids don't want to go to a therapist. They don't want to be different than their friends. The kids look and act normal but inside they are going not only through loss, but an ongoing sense of trauma.

"In the months following Koby's death," she continued, "we realized that everything was different and we couldn't be the same kind of parents we had been before. Our children saw us crying, but often did not express their own feelings because they didn't want to hurt us further."

In the middle of the emotional turmoil that followed Koby's death, Daniel and Eliana were invited to Camp Moshava, a Bnai Akiva summer camp in the U.S. Seth and Sherri accepted the invitation, believing a supportive camp environment would be good for the children, but they soon began receiving calls from camp administrators.

"They told us, for example, that Daniel was refusing to unpack his bags and was not interacting with the other boys in his group," Seth recalls. "Daniel later explained to us, 'I was crying because every day I would see kids who were Koby's age, and I kept thinking how much he would love it there.'"

"We asked ourselves, 'Wouldn't it be a great idea to create a camp like Moshava that would be exclusively for kids who had lost parents or siblings? It would be a camp with all the wonderful recreational activities of a place like Moshava, but with a little therapy as well. It would be a place where kids could both laugh and cry, a place where they would be able to share their feelings with others who had experienced the same kind of tragedy they had. It would be a place for these children to be together, so they would not feel alone any more.'"

Despite their lack of experience and money, the

couldn't think of any cause more deserving of support.

"The work of the Koby Mandell Foundation," Scharf continued, "is very important for the entire Jewish people, amounting to a collective effort to help those of our brothers and sisters whose lives have been impacted by terrorism.

"Thank God that Seth and Sherri Mandell found the strength within themselves to make something good happen out of tragedy."

Randolph will be the second major league baseball star to be honored by the foundation. The honoree at last year's dinner in Bethesda, Md., was ex-Baltimore Orioles superstar, Cal Ripken. Mandell said that Ripkin was his son's idol when the family lived in suburban Washington before making aliyah in 1996.

In explaining why Randolph was chosen as this year's honoree, Mandell said, "First of all, Koby was an American kid who loved baseball and we wanted to do something he would have enjoyed. Secondly, Willie Randolph is someone who showed great strength of character in his own life. Willie is an American success story, a role model to millions of kids to whom he shows it is possible to overcome adversity and make the world a better place."

Mandell, a former Hillel rabbi at Penn State University and the University of Maryland, also said, "I see Koby's story as a universal human story. Yes, Koby was a Jewish kid, but terrorism is a global issue, with terrible attacks happening not only in Israel, but in places like Beslan, Russia and on 9/11 in New York and Washington.

"When these events happen, as they did to our family, the question is how you respond to the situation and if you

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Mandells succeeded in creating a camp for hundreds of children through what Seth calls “a combination of sheer will power and skills that Sherri and I had and were able to use.”

They were also helped by the huge stir created by Koby's death. “After Koby died,” Seth recalled, “people from *The Jerusalem Post* came to our shiva because they knew Sherri very well as a frequent contributor to the paper.

“The *Post* ran a story that featured a photo of Koby in a New York Yankees baseball cap on top of the Empire State Building. That led to an article on Koby's life and death in *The New York Times*. So there was a high level of awareness of Koby, especially in the U.S. Jewish community, which Sherri and I had the specific skills to capitalize on.”

Camp Koby's staff includes trained counselors and professional therapists who support children in sharing their stories and expressing their feelings.

“The focus is on having fun and doing all the things kids do at regular camp,” said Sherri, “but in the company of other children with whom they can share what happened to them. It turns out that Camp Koby is the happiest camp I know. The whole place is one huge support group.”

Many children come back to Camp Koby, and the Mandells have created Internet chat rooms as well as follow-up programs and mini-camps to keep the children connected and supported.

Seth was asked if Camp Koby amounts to a kind of ghettoization of the children.

“That might be the case,” he responded, “if they were together all the time, but remember, the camp is only 20 days a year. What the camp does is to energize the children and provide them with enough strength to get through the year and cope with what they deal with in their normal lives. The camp also creates a second family for the children, a family composed of other children, counselors, therapists and others like Sherri and myself.”

In talking about some of the foundation's newer programs, Sherri said, “I love the two-day mothers' healing retreats we do for widows and other bereaved mothers. We use a lot of therapeutic techniques, such as drumming, and each participant gets a massage. There are also groups



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for couples, which can be more challenging. It is easier for women to talk about their feelings. Men are more active, but it is harder for them to open up.”

The greatest reward, she said, is witnessing how the camp helps deeply traumatized people put their lives back together. “At a recent Sukkot reunion, a woman came up to me and told me the story of how terrorists came into her house and shot her child in his bed. She said she recently moved to Ashkelon, where she knew no one, but soon connected to another mother of a child at our camp, who has become her best friend.

“There are so many terrible stories we get to know, like the family that lost a son, adopted another child and the following day, the father was killed. In another family a father, mother, and 9-year-

Scenes from Camp Koby, which the siblings and children of victims of terrorism can attend for free.

old child were killed, leaving nine children without parents. The childrens' uncle took them in, making him and his wife responsible for a total of 15 children.”

Sherri added, “We have children and families from all social strata, but there are a disproportionate number of poorer people, since those with fewer means are the ones who ride city buses and so many of the terrorist attacks focused on the buses.”

Still, she said, “the grief our families are experiencing is so strong that it transcends class distinctions. People from different social environments become close friends because they share a pain that those who have not experienced it can never fully understand.”

Sherri said the camp has helped the couple's own children deal with their grief. “They see us dealing with the pain and using it to improve the world, instead of being passive and not addressing it, and that has helped bring us together.”

Seth said that partly because of how he and Sherri chose to respond to the tragedy, Koby is always present for Daniel, Eliana and Gavi, and that creates its own particular dynamic.

“Our oldest son,” he noted, “is now a considerably older than Koby was when he died — he is graduating high school already. Eliana, who is now 15, recently said, ‘You know, Koby was just a baby.’ The truth is that it's very hard for our kids to live up to Koby. When a person is not there, they become perfect.”

Talking about that dynamic, Seth observed, “Look, I very consciously set out to make Koby the most famous 13-year-old Jewish boy in the world. Yet at home we don't talk about Koby as a hero, but as a regular kid, which was what he was. Still, we wanted to give his life and death a meaning for ourselves and others, and, in order to accomplish that aim, it is worth turning him into a mythological figure. In any case, in Israel, where we live, we are more or less normal people. It is only in America that we have become something else.”

Asked if he regretted taking Koby from the relative safety of suburban Maryland to a settlement on the West Bank, Mandell responded, “Yes, I feel guilty all the time, but ultimately you realize that it's all in God's hands, that terrorism can strike not only



in Tekoah but anywhere in Israel and the world.”

Did he and Sherri have any thoughts of leaving Tekoah after Koby's death?

“We decided to stay primarily because of the kids,” he responded. “They are happy and at home there, and Tekoah is a beautiful community where observant and non-observant Jews live together. To have left Tekoah would only have compounded the tragedy.”

Responding to the same question, Sherri stated, “Every parent who loses a child feels guilty. We cannot change what happened to Koby, but we have the consola-

tion of knowing that we have turned his death into a life-giving force. There is no better way to honor Koby's memory than to give hope and consolation to so many others whose lives, like our own, have been ravaged by terrorism.”

The Second Annual Koby Mandell Humanitarian Award Gala Dinner will begin at 6 p.m. on Nov. 28 at the Puck Building, 295 Lafayette St., Manhattan. For further information about the foundation and the dinner, visit www.koby-mandell.org, or call (888) 622-5629 or (212) 840-1166.