

# Scholarships rescue Gaza evacuees

• By RAFAEL D. FRANKEL

Before the disengagement, Gilad Meiler had a comfortable arrangement. He lived with his parents in Gush Katif and drove to Sderot to attend university.

But after the withdrawal, Meiler found himself living with his family in a Jerusalem hotel. Due to the distance, returning to study at Sderot was not an option, and though he was accepted to study at Ariel College the financial burdens of tuition and keeping an apartment in Ariel were too great for him to bear.

"Everything was so much more expensive," the economics student said. "I really didn't have enough money to keep studying." Fortunately for Meiler, he was alerted to a recently established scholarship fund for college and university students from Gush Katif.

The fund gave him \$1,000 to help cover his rent and tuition costs; tuition runs up to NIS 12,000 at Ariel. The money, he said, made the difference between being able to continue in school, "or having to get a job and save up."

Started in October by Mark Lawner, a retired *oleh*, and Michal Shomron, formerly of Neveh Dekalim, the Gush Katif Scholarship Fund has already raised \$112,000 for

Gush Katif students who were in danger of not being able to study this year because of financial burdens stemming from the disengagement.

"It came to our attention that students could no longer pay for university because the families were no longer earning money," Lawner said. Of 2,100 people who lost their jobs as a result of the disengagement, only 600 have found new work, according to the Committee of Gush Katif Settlers.

With a large donation from the One Israel fund and contributions from a number of other American and Israeli groups and individuals, the Scholarship Fund has so far given out 96 scholarships ranging in value from \$500 to \$1,000. The fund had originally hoped to give away grants to the tune of \$2,000 but, because "the need was so great," Lawner said, they opted to decrease the amount of money given to each student and increase the amount of students they were able to assist.

The organization is helping keep the students on their feet until "hopefully the parents down the line will get back to normal life and be able to pay for the tuition later on," Eliezer Jaffe, a professor of social work at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the chairman of Free Loan, the organization charged with handling the money and distributing the grants. "It's a life saver because

they can start their studies again; they didn't have to miss a year."

"If you don't keep these kids in school you're going to have a second-generation ripple effect from the disengagement, and that would really be a terrible result of the evacuation," he said.

Who receives the scholarships and in what amount is determined by a committee, headed by Shomron, that is made up mostly of community leaders from Gush Katif including two rabbis and a professor. Criteria are mostly based on how great the financial need is and how much the disengagement has effected the financial status of the family.

According to Shomron, there are around 300 university students from Gush Katif but only enough money at the present time to give scholarships to 123.

"There are a lot more students that need support, but since they weren't the ones most in need they didn't get money," she said.

Since there is not enough money to go around, Lawner has taken to lobbying Israeli universities to waive tuition fees for Gush Katif students. So far, Bar-Ilan University has agreed to waive tuition in full, while Ariel College has set up a fund to provide 50 percent grants to Gush Katif students. Tel Aviv University is "working on it," Lawner said, while Hebrew University has yet to respond to the request.

In the meantime, the fund is seeking further donations from Israel and abroad so it can assist the remainder of the Gush Katif students in need.

"We continue to need help and we welcome any support," Lawner said.