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How Phoenix volunteers can change young Israelis' lives

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When I retired two years ago, I began asking myself a number of questions: What would my next chapter look like? How would I write it? How could I make a positive impact on my local Phoenix community? How could I use my skills and experience to support issues and causes that are close to my heart and that reflect my Jewish values, including contributing to a strong state of Israel?

Many retirees spend weeks or months making this transition. I was lucky enough to quickly find an opportunity that was right for me: volunteering with Israel Connect, a global nonprofit that connects over 1,000 mentors in the U.S. and Canada with students across Israel to increase their English language proficiency.

The Israel Connect model is simple because it has identified a growing demand in the need for middle and high school students in Israel to master English and has also created the supply of volunteers like myself who are fluent and want to help.

Before I began volunteering, I thought I knew a lot about Israel; I used to be active in many local Jewish institutions including Hillel, ADL, the Jewish Federation and Temple Solel. What I only recently learned, however, is that up to 25% of Israel's university entrance exams are focused on English proficiency. How well students score on those exams can determine their economic mobility and put them on the path to success.

It is incredibly difficult to become proficient in English without access to native speakers which many students, particularly in Israel's peripheries, lack. That's where Israel Connect mentors come in. One morning a week, retirees in Arizona, Florida, New York, California, Toronto, Montreal and many more communities boot up their computers and log onto a video platform where they meet with students. Israel Connect provides the video training as well as the curriculum. As long as we have an internet connection, we have everything we need.

My Israel Connect story is unique. Instead of connecting with a young student, I was paired with a man named Itzik, who teaches English to Israeli youth on a kibbutz in the Negev. Itzik wanted to improve his English conversation skills so that he could help his students improve theirs. My work with him was having a ripple effect from our computer screens to his classroom.

Itzik and I quickly struck up a friendship. He gave me a window into everyday life in Israel such as how he and his wife, a nurse on the kibbutz, help to strengthen their community there, how they, as a secular Jewish family, celebrate the Jewish holidays and how he engages his students. Our conversations have given me a whole new perspective on Israel. They even helped me with my other volunteer work in Phoenix which includes reading to elementary school students in Phoenix public schools.

Even after our official Israel Connect school year ended, Itzik and I remained in touch. Now I'm working directly with 14-year-old Noah who is preparing for her university exams. She lives in northern Israel and is a windsurfer who hopes to someday be on the Israeli Olympic Team. Next year she will attend Technion University once a week taking various science classes. Getting to know and work with students eager to learn is what makes Israel Connect so special. I know they can benefit from my support; Israel Connect partners with Israel's Ministry of Education to identify schools that have the greatest need. I also know that I'm not only improving their English, but their confidence as well, which is incredibly rewarding.

There are many ways I support Israel, but very few of them give me the opportunity to make an immediate and direct impact on the lives of young people there. I am grateful I have this opportunity, and I hope other recent retirees in Phoenix who are exploring their next chapter will take advantage of it as well. **JN**

Birnbaum is a retired Phoenix resident and mentor with Israel Connect, the global nonprofit that pairs volunteers across North America with students in Israel to increase their English language proficiency.