

The Boston Globe

Israel Trauma Coalition comes to Boston to help with emotional healing after Boston Marathon bombings

By Evan Allen / Globe Correspondent / May 9, 2013



Yoon S. Byun/Globe Staff

Teachers listened to a presentation by the Israel Trauma Coalition at Watertown High School Wednesday.

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When Kara Conceison learned that her hometown was on lockdown as a Boston Marathon bombing suspect was on the run, the Watertown teacher's mind raced to her sixth-graders: resilient, but too young to be watching armored cars and SWAT teams with semi-automatic rifles rolling by their homes.

"Teachers were texting back and forth, 'I wonder how this student is, I wonder how this student is,'" Conceison said.

Her anxiety rings familiar to the Israel Trauma Coalition. Mental health professionals who specialize in trauma, they have helped stitch lives together over and over again in the aftermath of terrorist bombings and mass tragedies in their own country and around the world. Now, they have come to Boston, where they have spent the last week meeting with those affected by the bombings. [Full story for BostonGlobe.com subscribers.](http://BostonGlobe.com)

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Israeli team helps Marathon survivors

By Evan Allen

| GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

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WATERTOWN — When Kara Conceison learned that her hometown was on lockdown as a Boston Marathon bombing suspect was on the run, the Watertown teacher's mind raced to her sixth-graders: resilient, but too young to be watching armored cars and SWAT teams with semiautomatic rifles rolling by their homes.

“Teachers were texting back and forth: ‘I wonder how this student is. I wonder how this student is,’” Conceison said.

She struggled, too, with another, more personal question: Eight months pregnant, she wondered what kind of world she was bringing her son into. But when her students came back to school, she had to put her own grief away. The children were shaken, jumpy, and withdrawn, and they had endless questions.

Her anxiety is familiar to the Israel Trauma Coalition. Mental health professionals who specialize in trauma, they have helped stitch lives together over and over again in the aftermath of terrorist bombings and mass tragedies in their own country and around the world. Now they have come to Boston, where they have spent the last week meeting with those affected by the bombings, including more than 100 Watertown teachers.

“Trauma, when it comes to reside within you, is a partner that you take over the years,” said Talia Levanon, director of the coalition. “We’re trying to minimize the control it has over our lives.”



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“There’s an expectation that as professionals, as teachers, as somebody who knows what to do, you will come and fix everything,” coalition member Ruvie Rogel told Watertown teachers.

On April 15, two bombs exploded near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, killing three people and wounding more than 260. Days later, the two accused bombers allegedly shot an MIT police officer to death and engaged in a gun battle with police in - Watertown, during which one bombing suspect was killed and the other fled. The town went into lockdown for about 18 hours while police searched house to house.

“The first time is a shattering experience,” Levanon said before the session at Watertown High School Wednesday. “It shatters the assumption that the world is safe, that if you are a good person, nothing bad will happen to you.”

The team also visited the school that the bombing’s youngest victim, 8-year-old Martin Richard, attended. And the Israelis met in Watertown, Boston, and Westborough with emergency workers, medical professionals, and religious leaders.

The coalition unites about 40 organizations in Israel that also responded to Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy and the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. The coalition’s trip is being sponsored by Combined Jewish Philanthropies, a Boston organization that helps people in need and advocates for Israel.

The team of six specialists emphasizes that every person’s response to trauma is individual, that people cope in their own ways, and that to care for others, people must first care for their own well-being. They use the analogy of oxygen masks on an airplane: Before you fit one over the child next to you, you must put on your own.

“There’s an expectation that as professionals, as teachers, as somebody who knows what to do, you will come and fix everything,” coalition member Ruvie Rogel told the Watertown teachers. “This is very unrealistic, especially in a situation when you are actually sharing the event with the population that you are supposed to help.”

But for those with jobs caring for others, it is not always natural to pause for their own healing.

But that is exactly what school and town administrators had come to do Thursday. They began by putting crayons to paper. Draw life before the bombing, they were told. Draw it during the bombing. Draw it afterward.

Long white sheets of paper charted the transformation: A sunny day became a black scribble in Superintendent Jean Fitzgerald’s picture, then changed again to two hands reaching toward each other to help.

Others were bleaker. Middle School administrative assistant Judy Wheaton drew three simple faces: the first a smile, the second a scream, the third wet with tears. “When we came back to work, I thought it was behind us. . . . I thought I was fine,” she said, discussing her drawing in a group.

But what the daylight keeps at bay, the nighttime exposes. “It turns out a lot of people are having nightmares about it,” she said. “Violent nightmares, waking you from a deep sleep.”

Shiri Daniels, the coalition member who directed the exercise, said self-reflection is crucial. She recalled her own first experience with terrorism, in 2001. She was nine months pregnant, working as the head of emotional and clinical support in a Tel Aviv middle and high school, when a suicide bombing at a nightclub killed 20 young people, including seven students from her school.

“It was really scary, but you don’t think about it because you’re so caught up in helping others, you don’t stop to think,” she said. “Finally, it ended in high blood pressure.”

Coalition members, scheduled to leave Friday, have insisted they are not here to tell people how to react, but to start a dialogue about healing. The trauma will never entirely fade.

“Some people think that resilience means going back to what you were before,” Daniels said. “But actually, there’s no way back. You don’t go back, you move forward.”

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