

INNOVATIVE CENTER FOR BLIND-DEAF

It's hard enough to be blind; being blind and deaf is much more difficult. Now the country's only learning center for the deaf-blind has joined the prestigious international Karten Network of centers for adults with disabilities, which is based in England, Scotland and Wales. The network aims at improving the quality of life and independence level of disabled adults with a supportive learning environment that uses state-of-the-art computer technology.

The new Karten Computer-Aided Training, Education and Communication Center (CTEC) for People with Deaf-Blindness is located at Tel Aviv's Center for Deaf-Blind Persons in the Helen Keller House is already helping 15 young adults learn communication, life and vocational skills. The Center for Deaf-Blind Persons, established in 1989 by the Beth David Institute, is the only Israeli organization that develops and provides comprehensive educational, rehabilitation and social services for this population.

The most common cause of deaf-blindness here is Usher Syndrome, a genetic condition affecting an estimated 1,000 Israelis. Victims are born with hearing loss as well as retinitis pigmentosa, a progressive and degenerative eye disease. Students at the learning center range in age from 20 to 50. These years are considered a window of opportunity for individuals with Usher Syndrome, a time when they retain enough residual vision to prepare for total blindness. Several of the center's staff members have Usher Syndrome themselves - a fact which helps them empathize with the students and set an example of success.

The vision-hearing impaired need services and programs specifically designed to meet their needs. The learning center uses modern technology to teach the deaf-blind to read files via a Braille display or enlarged text, use e-mail and communicate via MSN messenger. Daily life skills include solutions to such mundane problems as how to get help in a store and how to use the bank, thereby gaining independent control of one's finances. These skills are taught in one-on-one sessions, and can make the difference between isolation and dependence and an independent life.

Leah, a 50-year-old from a poor neighborhood in Tel Aviv, is both deaf and severely visually impaired from Usher Syndrome. For years, she had used tactile sign language to communicate with friends and family, including her five children. Several months ago, despite her low self-esteem and poor reading and writing skills, she was persuaded to try using a computer at the new learning center. Since then, her progress has been

remarkable. For the first time, Leah can communicate independently with her friends, make doctor's appointments and carry out other activities that most adults take for granted.

A generous donation from the Ian Karten Charitable Trust covered most of the necessary equipment and renovations, and paved the way for the enlarged Tel Aviv learning center to join the Karten CTEC Network. The new facility also has the support of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services. Dr. Shlomo Elyashar, head of the ministry's rehabilitation division, says the Karten center will greatly advance rehabilitation and education for the hearing and visually disabled.