

ISRAEL

Young Chicagoans prepare to serve in the IDF

By HILLEL KUTTLER

“WELCOME HOME, Roni! The IDF is lucky to have you,” read a colorful poster greeting Ronia Bell when she stepped into a soaring, white tent on the Ben-Gurion Airport tarmac shortly after dawn in mid-August.

The poster’s bearers were two friends from a gap-year program in 2018–19 at Bar-Ilan University, near Tel Aviv. Bell had enrolled there, she said, “to see what I was getting into” regarding the decision she’d made to settle in Israel.

Now, the 19-year-old West Rogers Park native was back, taking her first steps in the country as a citizen in advance of enlisting in December in the Israel Defense Forces—in a naval-patrol unit, she hopes.

Bell wasn’t alone. The 242 immigrants from 23 U.S. states who filled her chartered El Al plane included 41 young men and women—among them Bell and two others from Chicago—whom the IDF classifies as “lone soldiers”: those from abroad who volunteer to serve but whose parents do not live in Israel.

The Garin Tzabar organization eases the way for most lone soldiers by settling groups of 15 or so on kibbutzim across the country, arranging for kibbutz couples to be their parents in absentia and providing plentiful emotional support.

Bell’s new home is Kibbutz Kissufim, just east of the Gaza Strip. Kibbutz Urim, only 12 miles from Kissufim, is where Eden Kahn, an 18-year-old from Highland Park, and David Raynes, 22, of Wilmette, now reside.

Other lone soldiers played a role in the three Chicagoans deciding to serve in the IDF.

For Bell, it was the example of her sister Malkaya, 24, who now lives in the Negev.

In the summer of 2018 at an Israeli center for lone soldiers, a young man from Belgium told Kahn of his positive experience in the army, despite not having been selected for his preferred military unit.

“It was physically hard, but he found a place for himself,” Kahn said. She decided: “I can do it.”

Raynes was struck by conversations with a lone soldier last summer, when he, too, visited Israel.

“I wanted to make sure I was doing something meaningful for me, and could contribute to the state,” said Raynes, who will try out for the combat engineering corps.

On the August flight to Israel, Raynes chatted up fellow lone soldiers. “It was really exciting: so many people doing the same thing,” he said.

A celebratory mood enveloped those assembled for the newcomers’ arrival, and their cheers cascaded into the steamy morning once the doors of the aircraft opened. Mothers and fathers exiting the plane grasped their children’s hands as they gingerly descended the ramp stairs. One man knelt and kissed the pavement of his new country. An elderly woman was pulled along by her small dog.

Across from the plane, hundreds of relatives and friends lined a barrier, holding banners, waving Israeli flags, shouting greetings and, when their loved ones came into sight, racing to hug them. The lone soldiers, all wearing green t-shirts they’d been given at the Kennedy Airport departure ceremony, posed for a group photograph by the plane.

Just ahead of Bell, Baltimore’s (now Kibbutz Lavi’s) Josh Schwartz and Danny Gross were greeted by their ex-classmate Gil Kuttler, a Herzliya resident who preceded them four years ago as a lone soldier. The friends pressed shoulders into shoulders and rotated in an impromptu dance, grinning ear to ear, then walked into the tent.



Photo credit: Hillel Kuttler.

From left: David Raynes, Eden Kahn, and Ronia Bell after landing in Israel on Aug. 14.

There, barely a word could be heard above the din of a band playing on a stage. After hugging her friends and her brother Chanan, 24, a Haifa resident, Bell took a seat. Someone brought her a slushy iced coffee.

“Just like Dunkin’ Donuts,” she quipped.

A procession of speakers—among them Sara Netanyahu, the prime minister’s wife—rose to the podium. Modiin Mayor Haim Bibas told the group that he could relate to their situation, as he’d grown up in a “home of immigrants” in Beit Shean.

“I know what it’s like. My door is always open to you,” he said.

Isaac Herzog, chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, called the scene “one of the great moments of our time.”

Happy times back in Chicago, though, will be shelved for a while.

Raynes said he’ll miss attending Cubs games and walking his dog Buddy along Lake Michigan. Bell won’t soon be devouring her mother’s cookies and her father’s pancakes, both packed with chocolate chips. Kahn will not be around when her grandparents from Northbrook, Julie and Herb Pomerantz, come by for Shabbat dinner every week.

Their parents expressed pride in the children’s path to Israel, the soldiers-to-be said, though it is bittersweet for many.

“At O’Hare, my parents were crying,” Kahn said of the previous day’s departure. “When she got back, my mother sat in my room for a half-hour.” ■

Hillel Kuttler’s feature articles have appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal. He can be reached at hk@HillelTheScribeCommunications.com.