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SOMEONE YOU SHOULD KNOW

Resident joins mass immigration to Israel

by ELIZABETH TAUFA

When University at Buffalo graduate and Amherst resident Matthew Schwartz traveled through Israel this past summer, he fell so much in love with the country, he decided to move there.

Schwartz is part of the international organization Nefesh B'Nefesh, which facilitates the immigration of Jews to Israel, called "Aliyah." A person who makes Aliyah is called "olim."

"NBN is a grant-giving organization that assists you in your move to Israel," Schwartz said.

The main goal of NBN, which has been in existence for slightly more than five years, is to revitalize Aliyah and increase the numbers of olim by removing the financial, professional and logistical obstacles that may prevent interested parties from moving to Israel.

"The biggest issue is employment," said Charley Levine, a spokesman for NBN.

"We set most newcomers up with jobs within the first six months."

Levine noted that NBN, which has transported more than 14,000 North American Jews to Israel during its tenure so far, has a 99 percent retention rate, meaning 99 percent of those who make the journey end up staying.

"We have another 20,000 who are at some stage of the process," Levine added.

Upon arrival in Israel, Schwartz will spend the first month on a Kibbutz getting acclimated to his new country.

"During that time I'll be in an intensive Hebrew language program," he said. "Then I'll be serving two years in the Israeli Defensive Forces, then hopefully going to graduate school in Tel Aviv."

Schwartz, who has a linguistics degree from UB, hopes to continue his education in languages at the University of Tel Aviv.

Aside from becoming enamored with the country during his summer trip, Schwartz has deeper reasons for wanting to move to Israel.

"I have always had a connection to Israel," he said. "I'm the grandson of a Holocaust survivor."

"There are many different reasons to move to Israel," Levine said. "There are people whose grandparents were wiped out in the Holocaust, and they want to rejoin the Jewish community, and those who stumbled into Israel last summer and want to go back. But there's a common denominator that they're all thinking people who have a strong sense to become part of a Jewish majority culture."

"Majority culture" refers to the rhythms of the yearly calendar being in sync with the Jewish faith, the Hebrew language being the predominant language and being a part of a community that incorporates Jews from 120 different countries, Levine added.

One problem that NBN and its participants have faced over the years however is the turbulent, and at times violent, atmosphere in Israel and surrounding countries, though it's not something Schwartz is particularly worried about.

"It has been violent, but I feel very safe in Israel," he said. "A coward dies a thousand deaths."

"No one in his right mind would not ask about the safety of Israel but these are much quieter times," Levine conceded. "A year ago, Israel was in a war with Lebanon, and three years ago there were several terrorist attacks, but I think people are highly motivated to go see the bad headlines as just something of today. The history means much more."

And Schwartz is not worried about meeting other people while in Israel.

"I have one friend already in Israel, but I've been connecting with other people who are on my flight through Facebook."

NBN also has services for connecting with peers and finding schools for families who move.

"There are two strong groups who move," Levine said. "The first is young families, parents in their late 20s or early 30s with one or two kids, and the second is singles, around 21 or 22, just out of college, who want to start a new life."

"It's a different experience in life," Schwartz said of his decision to move. "You have to do what feels right. I didn't want to be in an office in 20 years wondering what would have happened."



Matthew Schwartz



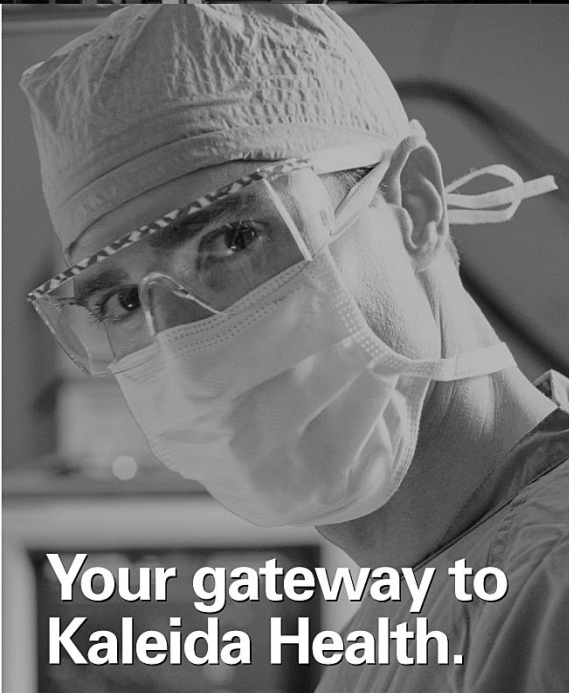
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If you have a suggestion for someone to feature in this column, send it to Jessica L. Finch, Amherst Bee, associate editor, P.O. Box 150, Buffalo, NY 14231-0150, or call 204-4917.