

## Interview with Ruthie Sobel Luttenberg ISRAEL Design for Change

Design for Change (DFC) is exploding around the globe, and now has 35 plus partner countries. The “I CAN” virus of enthusiasm for its mission and ideals seems to be unstoppable. Behind “I CAN” in each country is an equally important back story about organizing, fundraising, and the many lessons learned along the way. Recently, **Ruthie Sobel Luttenberg (Ruthie)** took some time from her busy DFC schedule to answer questions, and talk with us at the **Design for Change Blog (David)**. Read more below about how she started the effort around her “kitchen table,” and soon after had the support of the Israeli Ministry of Education.

**David:** Can you describe the current state of education in Israel?

**Ruthie:** Israel has worked toward and views its education system as comprehensive and complete. The educational effort is fully funded (ie: accounts for approximately 10% of GDP) and most schools are subsidized by the government. Structurally, it divides out to three tiers: primary education (grades 1-6, approx. ages 6-12), middle school (grades 7-9, approx. ages 12-15) and high school (grades 10-12, approx. ages 15-18). To achieve comprehensiveness and completeness, education is compulsory from kindergarten through 12th grade. The school year begins at the end of August. It runs through the last day of June for elementary school pupils. The year ends approximately 10 days earlier for middle school and high school pupils.

As a result of this focus and dedication, Israel was named the second most educated country in the world according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s Education at a Glance report, released in 2012.

**David:** When and how did you first hear about Design for Change?

**Ruthie:** In June 2011 my husband forwarded me the link to Kiran’s TED talk and said, “This was made for you. You have to see it.”

**David:** Do you remember the moment when you decided to bring DFC to Israel? What prompted you to do it?

**Ruthie:** I had developed a very similar program here and as soon as I saw her TED talk I contacted her because it made sense for me to join a global initiative and going concern rather than reinvent the wheel. For me, DFC was the missing link in the work I do in my organization. I run three programs now, Birthday Angels, Teen Angels and

DFC. Each program addresses a different level of self-realization if we talk about it in terms of Maslow's pyramid of needs. Birthday Angels (parties) give children a self of feeling loved and that they belong. Teen Angels strengthens self esteem for teens who learn a skill and give it back to the community. The rewards of success and great feedback making them feel they are worthy , capable human beings. DFC is self-realization in the fullest meaning of the word. In the program, the students identify and define the problems which they themselves solve and gain recognition for.

**(For more information on Maslow's Pyramid and self-realization, click here).**

**David:** What did you feel was missing, that DFC could provide?

**Ruthie:** As a parent and an informal education developer, I have always been troubled by teachers who are looking for right answers. I always believed that curiosity and exploration that becomes personally meaningful is what kids retain. And our system is consumed with priming kids for high grades rather than high standards. There is a vast array of programs running in our educational system, many that deal with moral development as well. There are also educational startups offering design thinking processes for students. Personally, I recognized it as an intervention that could take children beyond service learning and cultivate the mindset for social activism.

**David:** How did it fit in with/complement the existing educational scenario in Israel?

**Ruthie:** Design for Change has the potential to radically change the classrooms without creating a tsunami that requires building the whole school system from scratch. It can work within the system and change the mindsets of children and the teachers at the same time.

**David:** What were the first steps you took to organize DFC in Israel? When?

**Ruthie:** I immediately contacted all the education people I knew and sat them down around my kitchen table to see if they'd like to pilot the program with their students. This was in May 2011

**David:** What was the name of the first school(s) or group(s) that committed to DFC? Do you remember their projects?

**Ruthie:** There were several teachers I knew who immediately adopted the idea and piloted it with their students.

Ruthie Almog in the Mevot Iron School brought it to her students who undertook four different projects: Fixing potholes in the basket ball court/parking lot; Cleaning up the beaches; Cleaning the bathrooms; and Encouraging less vulgar speech between students in school and promoting use of the library.

There was also Suzie Russak, a Supervisor for the Dror School, whose groups took on almost eight projects: Taking care of neglected dogs; Strong students mentoring weaker students in school; Discouraging people from SMS- ing while driving; Healthy eating and recycling.

My husband brought the project to the school where he teaches.

Nava Mark, the Environmental Leadership teacher brought it to her group who initiated the Community Garden Project which won the 2012 Challenge.

**David:** How many schools or groups did you recruit the first year?

**Ruthie:** Approximately nineteen.

**David:** What were your biggest challenges when implementing DFC in Israel?

**Ruthie:** I have had many challenges and much luck implementing DFC in Israel. I knew that I didn't have the budget or the manpower that would require the implementation of the DFC on a national level - printing, workshops, prizes, editing, filming, translating, etc... I needed a partner with the backing. I was fortunate to have been collaborating with Ruach Tova over the years. They run Good Deeds Day in Israel and round up nearly half a million volunteers on one day every March to "give themselves as a gift" and volunteer to do something. But they never had an educational program to teach kids HOW to volunteer, HOW to choose a project and HOW to implement it. They saw the value of the program and have embraced it now, after two years as the jewel in their crown. It is their flagship project.

I was also able to bring the program to the top people at the Ministry of Education who recognized the value of this initiative and gave us the permission to work inside the school and give workshops for teachers. This is usually a long and arduous bureaucratic process. But we cut in front of the line when Kiran came to Israel and met the chief executive of the Ministry of Education. Within 15 minutes at a coffee shop in a Tel Aviv suburb at 7:00 AM, Dalit Stauber said, "I want this I CAN program in every class in the country."

**David:** Has there been any strategy to expand the reach of DFC in Israel?

**Ruthie:** Kiran's (the Founder of DFC) visit to Israel for the Sharing Event last year was instrumental for us in getting recognition by the Ministry of Education. Without that recognition we could not have entered the school system.

We worked through the Ministry of Education giving workshops to supervisors and coordinators who in turn would spread the word to the teachers. From October to January we gave nearly fifty full day workshops to close to two thousand education people.

[Ruach Tova](#) markets Good Deeds Days to all the municipalities nationally. In this way we spread the word throughout the country. However, it takes time for all these bureaucracies to internalize and facilitate the idea. I think this year we will reap the fruits of all this visibility and our hard work.

**David:** How large is your DFC team? How organized? Funding?

**Ruthie:** We are essentially two people working on this full time. We have recruited a team of volunteers who will be acting as mentors within the schools as well as a core group of judges. Ayana Schechtman is paid a full time salary to administer the project. I am the pedagogical director of DFC Israel. We work really well together.

I knew that the project would need manpower and financing. I collaborated with a well funded nonprofit that is sponsored by a major foundation. Ruach Tova pays for the printing and most of the expenses incurred by the program. Birthday Angels funds the rest. I also received a \$40,000 grant from an educational foundation for documentation and evaluation that enabled us to make lots of good clips this year, and run an external evaluation by a serious educational research institute. We will receive the results this Fall.

**David:** What has been the high point of your experience with DFC in Israel? Has there been a low point?

**Ruthie:** The sharing ceremonies were the high point. I was disappointed in the disparity between the number of people who came out of our workshops so enthusiastic and the number who actually ran the program with their students. I was also not completely happy with the quality of the projects the first year. Many of them were still teacher driven and were mostly projects of DOING without having gone through the FEEL or IMAGINE steps. This year the projects reflected more of the process. However, we still have a way to go.

I wasn't happy with the judging either. The judges were not immersed enough in the DFC process. Not enough work was done with them so they would really understand what we were looking for.

**David:** What have been the important lessons learned?

**Ruthie:** There have been many:

- **We need more than just workshops!** Despite the incredible enthusiasm of the participants, very few participants of our workshops passed it on to the teachers and it hardly reached the kids.
- **Understanding of the process needs more training.** Despite the fact that what is easily explained in the copywriting of four steps, it is not push button work. Each step needs to be done intentionally and seriously. To feel is not just to feel, it's also to explore, research, engage and reflect and define. This is true of each of the stages which are far more work than just what they declare as a stage.
- **Numbers can be misleading!** The fantastic numbers that the project boasts are misleading. It seems like millions of kids are doing this and sets an unrealistic expectation that millions of kids will be doing it as soon as they hear the four word mantra. This misled Ruach Tova that we would be producing greater number of projects than we actually did last year. It takes lots of time for educators to hear about it, understand it, make room in their work for it and do it.
- **Over mystification.** Every workshop we gave, people came out with sparkle in their eyes and determined to run and to it. However, we found that many educators revered it so, they were afraid to actually do it. We need to demystify the process so that teachers understand that it's easier than they think.
- **There's too much on the teachers' plates.** The education system in Israel offers many amazing educational interventions beyond the curriculum. Teachers are overwhelmed and can't do them all. Teachers are not paid for the extra work entailed and many don't do it because of that.
- **Work with the teachers directly.** We have reached the conclusion that we need to do workshops directly with the teachers and not with the Supervisors who don't pass on the good word.

- **Mentorship helps.** We need to mentor teachers and walk them through the process , *in the schools*, so that they don't become discouraged along the way. We will only mentor schools where the Principal has made a commitment to integrate design thinking into the system, giving the teachers paid hours and committing the majority of the staff to the process.

**David:** What are you most looking forward to in the future?

**Ruthie:** I hope that we are able to create a critical mass doing Design for Change which will be reflected in the quality of our lives in Israel. If enough children internalize the system, they are bound to leave school and take a part in civil society, making it better than it is.

My next greatest goal is to see design thinking integrated into the curriculum of the schools. I am looking forward to seeing the book that DFC Global is publishing and translating it into Hebrew so that one day it can be a recognized subject taught in the schools. I also hope to engage more and more schools, and educators in the program

### **Ruthie's Bio**

*My name is Ruthie, and though my story may look like magic, it really is about love. I came to Israel in the early 70's I was full of idealism. I studied Philosophy by day, and volunteered in a poor Tel Aviv neighborhood by night. . I continued working in many capacities with disadvantaged communities for the years to come and specialized in designing informal educational programs and training informal educators. I decided to consolidate my experience and knowledge into a "do-it-yourself" party kit that I would dispense for free to all those kids who never celebrated their birthdays before. Today Birthday Angels has done 20,000 parties. Our activity has expanded and we run a national Teen Angels program training teens at risk to run parties for needy children in their neighborhoods and Design for Change which empowers children with the skills to change the world into one where they want to live.*

*I am blessed with a beautiful family and consider myself the luckiest person I know.*