

# And now for something completely different:



## Immigrant plans to sponsor family, then save the world

By RITA POLIAKOV  
Staff Reporter

When Oleg Shteyner moved to Canada from Sderot, he left behind rocket attacks, bomb sirens and his mother. Now, as a first-year university student, Shteyner's mission is simple.

"I came here with a clear goal. I didn't come here to discover Canadian life or assimilate into the culture. I came here... to save my family," he said.

Shteyner, whose parents divorced when he was young, immigrated to Sderot, Israel, from Ukraine with his mother in 1999.

"At the time, the town was very peaceful. It looked like a prosperous place... Only a year and a half afterwards a war broke out. Rockets from Gaza shot into Sderot daily," Shteyner, 20, said. "It not only crippled the economic situation of the city, but it really stopped people from looking forward to a better future."

Shteyner spent his childhood and teen years living with the knowledge that every class, every meal and every day might be his last.

"When I just moved there, I was still nine years old, still an innocent kid, and you move into a place where suddenly you're being attacked and targeted for reasons you don't understand and there's so much hate," he said, adding that, because he lived in the top floor of an apartment building, any government-enforced safety precautions became difficult to follow.

"The government built up bunkers. The problem was I lived with my mother on the highest floor of a building. Our bunker was downstairs, there was no way to get there. So you kind of understand if the bomb falls on your building, that's it."

Some nights, Shteyner would sit through up to 30 rocket attacks, one after the other. This, paired with Shteyner's financial difficulties, made one thing clear for the student.

"I realized I want to get out of Sderot and move on with my life," he said. "I (didn't) want to end up dead at the age of 16, because I happen to be at the wrong place at the wrong time."

It was in 2006 that Shteyner got his chance to leave. At that time, his father, who had moved from Ukraine to Canada, came to visit and offered to sponsor Shteyner so that he could immigrate to Canada.

"He said, 'You're playing with your life... I'm able to sponsor you,'" Shteyner said.

Shteyner left Sderot in 2007, when he was 17.

"When I left I promised my mother, aunt and grandpa that once I get to Canada, I'll get my education as soon as I can. My goal is to be able to find a job and sponsor (my family.)"

It's this goal that has shaped Shteyner's life and studies in Canada.

"When you sit in the library for five or six hours and try to memorize whatever for a test, (you ask), 'Why am I doing this? I don't even like this.' You can always say, 'Listen, if you don't pass this test, you're not going to help your family,'" he said.

After graduating from Newtonbrook Secondary School, Shteyner was accepted to

through social and recreational activities. Through this group, Shteyner, who had remained secular in Ukraine and Israel, began to learn about and immerse himself in Judaism.

"Ukraine historically is an extremely anti-Semitic country... I remember also when I was still a kid, every single year on Hitler's birthday, there were parades and skin-heads all over the place," he said.

"Judaism was something very foreign to me. In Ukraine, if you know you're Jewish, that's amazing, but just don't tell it to anyone if you want to be safe."

When Shteyner moved to Sderot, he was too preoccupied with his living situation to learn more about his religion. It was only in Canada that he started to connect to the Jewish community.

"Once I came to Canada, I see people welcoming me. There's no pressure, you can express yourself and learn... I started to become more observant," he said, adding that he joined NCSY's Torah High program, an after-school Jewish studies group.

Shteyner also worked with Jewish Immigrant Aid Services as a youth-to-youth leader, is involved with his university's Hillel, works at Kachol Lavan, a Hebrew Sunday school, and volunteers as a big brother with Chai Lifeline Canada, which supports families with sick children.

Shteyner's work and life story helped him win the 2009 Dennis Waldman Scholarship, which is awarded to youth involved in the Jewish community.

The student's interpretation of tikkun olam goes further than volunteerism. He chose to major in mineral engineering at U of T, one of the school's smallest engineering programs, because he

wants to physically repair the world.

"The reason why I chose this program is because I really care about the environment," he said, adding that his long-term goal is to reduce carbon emissions through mineral engineering, which includes the study of mining and geology.

Rabbi Avi Levinson, NCSY Canada's director of student advancement, thinks that, for Shteyner, repairing the Earth is a realistic goal.

"Politicians would probably die for his personality," Rabbi Levinson said. "There's no such thing as an obstacle, it's one thing after another. When he sees a cause and he believes in it, there's no stopping (him.) It's like a train coming at you head on."



Oleg Shteyner, now a first year University of Toronto student, immigrated from Sderot several years ago, where he suffered through up to 30 rocket attacks a night.

the University of Toronto's mineral engineering program, where he's currently a first-year student.

Unlike most youths, Shteyner doesn't own a television and he doesn't spend much time on the computer. His life is mostly made up of school and volunteer work.

"My family is very important to me. I'll do everything to help them. If that means I have to study hard and not do whatever an average teenager wants to do, that's OK," he said.

While at Newtonbrook, Shteyner got involved with the school's Jewish Student Union Club and with NCSY (formerly National Conference of Synagogue Youth) Canada, a group that engages youth