

Peres to disabled youngsters: You must never give up

• By GREER FAY CASHMAN

President Shimon Peres hosted the annual reception for ILAN - Israel Foundation for Handicapped Children on Thursday.

The reception began with a musical performance by students of the Herzfeld School for Special Education in Holon, whose mission it is to help physically and intellectually challenged children reach their maximum potential.

Peres, Ehud Ratzabi, ILAN chairman, and Shmuel Schnitzer, president of the Israel Diamond Exchange in Ramat Gan and ILAN chairman of community relations, spontaneously mounted the stage at the end of the performance to congratulate the performers.

Ratzabi, who has been chairman of ILAN for seven years, said that witnessing what ILAN students could do brought tears to his eyes, "it never goes away," he said, choked with emotion.

Ratzabi said that it excites him to see a little girl who last year had braces on her legs take her first steps without them, to watch the joy of a child in a wheelchair when meeting soldiers at an Israeli army base, and to hear an ILAN athlete call him by name.

The stigma attached to people in wheelchairs, however, makes him angry. He's met people with first and second degrees, who cannot get a job because of potential employers, who instead of looking at their qualifications, look only at the wheelchair.

"Don't they realize that [president Franklin D.] Roosevelt had polio and was confined to a wheelchair?" he asked, saying that his disability did not prevent him from functioning as a president.

Ratzabi commended Peres's attitude, the rapport he has with disabled children and the effort he makes to have children with disabilities integrated into mainstream society.

Shimon Tzurieli, ILAN direc-



PRESIDENT SHIMON PERES shakes hands with youngsters from ILAN – Israel Foundation for Handicapped Children at the beginning of an annual reception at his official residence yesterday. (Mark Neiman/GPO)

tor, was appreciative of the fact that over the past decade Israel's business community has taken ILAN under its wing, particularly the members of the Diamond Exchange, who he said not only contribute funds but time and energy.

Schnitzer said the diamond industry wants to contribute and adopted ILAN because they admire the spunk of its students and alumni.

Tzurieli announced that all members of the Rishon Lezion branch of ILAN were present, and were all ILAN alumni who wanted to give back to the community.

Wheelchair-bound Shimon Keinan, who heads the Rishon Lezion branch, appeared in a video production illustrating what these volunteers do. He

said he was cared for by ILAN from the age of four, when he lost his ability to speak following an operation and did not regain it until he was 16.

As proof that a wheelchair should not restrict anyone from living life to the full, 14-year-old Klil Or Ben-Haim, who sits on the board of the National Students Council, said that she always went to regular schools, has had many fully able friends, sat on various student committees, and never felt inhibited because of her condition.

"I was born handicapped," she said. "I can't change that, but I can work towards changing society's attitude. I volunteer in lots of places, and people can see what I'm doing, so they treat me as an equal."

Peres said to Schnitzer, "I want to tell you that of all the diamonds you have, this is the jewel in the crown."

To the ILAN youngsters and alumni, he said, "You have a non-stop war and you must never give in to despair. You not only fight every moment of your lives – you also triumph every moment of your lives."

"We are reaching an era when we can correct many of nature's mistakes. There are many ailments that were regarded for years as incurable, and now they are being cured," Peres said.

In mentioning the incurable ailments for which solutions have been found, he gave hope to countless families who may one day reap the benefits of medical science.