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PRESIDENT REUVEN RIVLIN (center) sits between his wife, Nechama, to his left and Gila Almagor, along with dozens of children and volunteers from the Gila Almagor Wishes Foundation at the President's Residence in Jerusalem yesterday. (Marc Neymay/GPO)

Rivlin hosts kids with cancer, 'the most important people'

• By GREER FAY CASHMAN

Even though baldness is currently in vogue among men who go to great lengths to shave their heads, it is painful to see children without hair on their heads, especially on girls who have barely reached the age of puberty.

One woman of 21 with a bald head and dangling earrings was moving restlessly at the President's Residence in Jerusalem on Sunday. But she moved easily and didn't seem to be the least bit self-con-

scious. Only when she came into full view could one see that one of her legs had been replaced by a thin steel rod to serve as a prosthesis.

The woman, Anna Ponomrav, has been a cancer patient since the age of two. Among the other young patients present, one boy and one girl below the age of puberty wore caps over their bald heads. The boy might have worn his for religious reasons, as he had fringes peeping out from beneath his oversized sweat shirt.

A teenaged boy in a wheelchair also had his head covered with a cap. Hair was beginning to grow back for some of the others, forming a dark, delicate fuzz on several scalps.

The youngsters were all part of the Gila Almagor Wishes Foundation who are being treated at Schneider Children's Hospital.

In the three decades-plus since she established the foundation, Almagor – who is also the first lady of Israeli stage and screen and an Israel Prize

laureate, as well as the recipient of many other awards – has made a point of bringing children with cancer to the President's Residence. She had done so during the terms of previous presidents, and had been trying to do so since Reuven Rivlin took office just over three years ago.

"Now, we're finally here," said Almagor, as she thanked Rivlin and his wife, Nechama, for taking the time to meet them.

A social activist on many levels, Almagor confessed that when she first heard about children with cancer, she simply didn't believe the doctor who told her. She has since discovered that cancer is non-discriminatory and attacks people of all ages, creeds, colors and nationalities.

Almagor created the foundation to be run on a strictly voluntary basis. No one collects a salary and all monies raised go solely toward realizing the wishes of cancer-stricken children. Almagor's goal remains to give the youngsters a good time in the hope that laughter will overwhelm their pain.

Almagor said she was sorry about the situation at Hadassah Medical Center that caused pediatric cancer patients to be transferred to other hospitals. Some of those children have been absorbed at Schneider Children's Hospital, where they are showered with affection, she said.

Rivlin told the youngsters that the hall they were gathered in had been used to receive royalty, heads of state and other dignitaries. "But today," he said, "we welcome the most important people,

our children. You are dearer to us than others, because you know how to cope with a difficult situation."

Rivlin said that he and his wife, Nechama, were happy to contribute to such a worthwhile foundation. Then, returning to one of his favorite subjects, Rivlin said if someone had asked him to make a wish when he was about nine-and-a-half years old, he would have wished for a state – a Jewish and democratic state in which Jews and Arabs would live together in harmony.

Jews and Arabs, secular and religious, certainly live together in Schneider, bound by a common illness. "We're like one big family," said Almagor.

Nabila Abu Lban – who speaks excellent Hebrew with wonderful diction and without a trace of an Arabic accent – sang the praises of Almagor, saying she was just like a mother to all of the children and calling her a unique and special woman. Nabila is 13 and has suffered from leukemia since she was one year old. She goes to Schneider every two weeks to receive a blood transfusion, as does her brother. Thanks to Almagor, Nabila said, the siblings had been overseas and participated in lots of fun events in Israel.

When Nabila finished speaking she was embraced by Nechama Rivlin.

Anna Ponomrav, who is a talented artist, presented the Rivlins with one of her paintings, and led a rousing chorus in honor of the president's birthday the previous day.

The back garden of the President's Residence contains two hybrid trees, each of which was originally an olive tree. When birds came to nibble at the olives, they carried seeds of fig trees in their beaks, said Rivlin, which became embedded in the trunk of the tree and eventually created a fig tree within the olive tree.

One of the trees has been dubbed a "wishing tree." Rivlin took the youngsters outside to silently make their wishes near it, telling them they were welcome to come back whenever they wanted.