

Remembering Ilan Naibryf: Fateful Connection Starts a New Legacy at the Maccabiah



Finn Arrillaga

On July 12th, 1200 members of the Maccabi USA delegation were at K'far Maccabiah celebrating the culmination of Israel Connect (IC), Maccabi USA's life-changing experiential educational program. Finn Arrillaga, the lone delegation member from Hawaii, along with his teammates

had engaged with everything Israel had to offer. They met the diverse Israeli people, trekked through ancient landscapes and Jewish sites, bonded with teammates, and reflected on their Jewish identities and connection to Israel.

As Finn sat listening to closing remarks, he was eagerly awaiting the start of the swimming competition he had been training for since he was 10 years old. Despite the anticipation, Finn's ears perked up when he heard a name that he recognized from home: Ilan Naibryf.

Ilan, a 21-year-old student at the University of Chicago and president of the Chabad student board, had lost his life the previous summer in the tragic Surfside condo collapse in Florida. He had been a standout high school soccer player in Hawaii and Finn's youth soccer coach. To close IC, the Delegation was remembering alumni lost since the last Games, and Finn didn't know that Ilan captained the U16 Boy's Soccer team at the 2017 Maccabiah, played at the 2015 European Maccabi Games, or that he was looking forward to the Games in 2022 before the tragedy. Finn was stunned.

On stage were Carlos Naibryf and Ronit Felszer, Ilan's parents, and one of his sisters, Tali Naibryf. They were somber yet uplifted by the Maccabi community rallying around Ilan, especially at an event that had such a tremendous impact on his life. Finn made his way through the crowd after the ceremony to introduce himself. They shared an instant connection and emotional embrace. Finn was shocked to find out that Carlos was a Master's swimmer—they were teammates!

Finn learned more about the Naibryf family's Maccabi connection. Carlos ran track for Argentina in 1985 and Tali ran at the 2017 Maccabiah for Maccabi USA. "Ilan was supposed to be with us in Israel," said Carlos. "That's why I got involved with the Maccabi USA swim team—to compete in his honor."

Promising to stay in touch, Finn then departed for his accommodation center and called his mother later that evening. "He was so excited to tell us he met Ilan's parents. I couldn't believe he ran into them in Israel," said Justine Stamen Arrillaga. "Ilan was an outstanding young man who made a great impact on our son and our community. We are still mourning his profound loss with his family and the Maccabi family."

Justine and her husband John came to Israel later that week to watch Finn swim and were blown away by the Maccabiah's impact on their son and so many others. In addition to deepening his connection to Israel, he felt more in touch with his heritage and made new Jewish friends.

Deeply moved by Finn's chance encounter with the Naibryfs, Justine and John created a \$250,000 scholarship fund in Ilan's memory within the newly endowed Stuart Weitzman Scholarship Fund*, cementing Ilan's legacy as a proud Jewish athlete and role model on and off the field.

Maccabi USA will forever be reminded that his presence brought together two families through a shared passion for sports, Jewish community, and Israel, who are now helping the next generation of young Jews to connect with their heritage. As Carlos said when asked why he chose the Maccabiah for such an emotional tribute to his son: "It's a moment when you can start living again, when you can be reminded about all the good things in this world, and it's something Ilan cared deeply about."



Ilan Naibryf

*If you would like to learn more or join in the campaign to honor Ilan Naibryf, please visit www.maccabiusa.com/weitzmanfund/