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PAULINE MENKES & ELISE KALLES & CAROLE GRAFSTEIN

setting the example

BY ADAM MICHAEL SEGAL

The Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies recently held its inaugural Woman of Valour luncheon, a “celebration of Toronto’s finest women.” The following stories about the luncheon’s three honorees— Pauline Menkes, Elise Kalles and Carole Grafstein, — will provide an engaging glimpse into the extraordinary lives of these accomplished women.

ELISE KALLES

The painting that adorns the wall in the very first room of Elise Kalles's home encapsulates what this dynamic woman is all about. It is a family portrait with Kalles, her husband, and the entire next generation of children and grandchildren, all of whom are warmly smiling. The painting's colors are soft and serene; the images exude comfort and sincerity.

"I commissioned it," Kalles tells me, beaming proudly as she motions to the work of art. "The painter is using it for a lifestyle book and I told her that if it's about me, I don't want a painting of me standing in front of the fabulous house I represent because although I love what I do, my real passion is being surrounded by my family."

The real Kalles is indeed a family-comes-first, 67-year-old matriarch. But she is also prolific in her professional life. To that end, Kalles is one of the most distinguished real estate brokers in Canada—ever. Walk down the streets of Toronto's opulent neighborhoods and you'll invariably spot the word *sold* emblazoned on countless signs sporting her name. Specializing in luxury homes, Kalles has a gift for selling palatial properties and has an impeccable reputation admired even by her peers.

The genesis of Kalles's fascinating life story is a rather somber one. Born in Poland the year World War II broke out, her early years were spent hiding from the Nazis with her family inside an attic. "The only people who survived from my family were those of us in the attic," she laments. Sadly, her father,

Moshe, was murdered nine days before liberation. After the war, the family settled in France before moving to Canada in 1951 when Kalles was 13.

Eight years after immigrating to Canada, she married Harvey Kalles, an up-and-coming owner of a real estate company that still bears his name. But Elise wasn't her husband's sidekick at the office back then. Rather, she was at home, looking after her young children and putting her entrepreneurial instincts into practice by launching a small business.



(l-r) Corinne Kalles, Jana Goodbaum, and Elise Kalles.

"I designed maternity clothes and sold them out of my home so I could be with my children," she recalls. The business grew and the Kalles home became cramped with clients and clothes constantly passing through. So Harvey had an idea: Why not come work with him? "He thought we would have more privacy in our home and I'd be happy making one sale a year," she says, laughing.

It took some time to build up a client base, but her first lucky break in real estate came when a friend entrusted her with the listing of her house—a mansion in the prestigious area of Forest Hill.

In time, Kalles's name became synonymous with prestigious homes. Just look at her glossy brochure, entitled

"Opening Doors to Homes of Distinction," and you'll see a selection of gorgeous houses, some of which have sold for more than \$20 million.

So what does it take to be so good at real estate? "It's all about relationships," Kalles says. "You have to be totally committed; you have to care. It's usually the largest investment a client makes. They don't want to feel any pressure. I have been doing this for 30 years and most of my business is referrals."

Kalles's caring inclinations branch beyond her family and clients. The Israel Cancer Research Fund, The Lion of Judah Women's Alliance of UJA Federation, Koffler Centre of the Arts, Shaarei Zedek Hospital, the Starlight Foundation, Hospital for Sick Children, and the Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care are just a few of the charitable groups she is involved with. "In our office, we give a percentage of every sale to an important cause," she reveals. "I feel it is very important to give back to the community."

As a child of the Holocaust, Kalles has a particularly deep affinity for the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies. So when she was recently honored as a Woman of Valour by the center, she felt very touched. "This is very dear to my heart because of where I come from," she says. "And what the center does now, with teaching people about the Holocaust, is so important. Simon Wiesenthal was the conscience and voice for the 6,000,000 Jewish victims. His work stands as a reminder and a warning for future generations, and the Wiesenthal Center will live on as his legacy."

At the Woman of Valour luncheon, Kalles was asked to give a speech. Fittingly, as she got up before nearly 400 people, her son, Michael, introduced her and stood by her side the entire time.

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Says Kalles, "Two of our three children are in the business with us and the nicest thing they say to me is that when they are out there and say my name or my husband's name, they are so proud. That's what I want. That's what makes my life so wonderful. Our business is truly a family business and what you really leave your children is your reputation."

CAROLE GRAFSTEIN, C.M.

For nearly half a century, Carole Grafstein has been passionately immersed in noble causes. From health care and interfaith understanding to the arts and the Jewish community, Grafstein has been a volunteer extraordinaire, donating her time, energy, wealth, and ideas. "I still get a 'high' when I'm part of a successful fundraiser," enthuses the mother of two and grandmother of three. "When I stop getting those 'highs,' it would be time to stop. But I'm still feeling it."

While the thrill of it all is a motivator for this philanthropic maven, Grafstein has met with her share of challenges on the charity circuit. In the 1970s, when she ventured into the throes of the Canadian Women's Opera Committee, her fundraising savvy faced some resistance.

"At that time, there were not too many Jews involved in opera," she recalls. "I had a lot of experience in fundraising with Mount Sinai and Hadassah and when I showed the opera committee how to fundraise, it wasn't well received. There were actually a lot of moments when I wanted to walk away. But my parents and husband wouldn't let me."

And it's a good thing for opera that Grafstein listened to her family. She went

on to be only the second Jewish president of the committee and helped the group's fundraising proceeds from its annual ball skyrocket. "They used to make \$25,000 with their corporate ball," she relates. "When I left, they were making between \$300,00 and \$400,000."

In the annals of Canadian Jewish history, Grafstein's family has a prominent place. Her father, the late Harry Sniderman, was a famous baseball player and was the first Jewish



Carole Grafstein (center) with son and daughter-in-law, Larry and Rebecca Grafstein.

employee hired by Bell Canada. After marrying his beloved bride, Molly, he went on to be a successful hotelier and revered philanthropist.

"My parents and my grandparents were always big philanthropists in the Jewish community," notes Grafstein. "They always taught me that if you take something out of a community, then you have to give something back."

Giving back is essentially Grafstein's job, though she doesn't take home a paycheck for it. Some of the key causes she supports include Mount Sinai, Baycrest Hospital, Canadian Cancer Fashion Committee, Princess Margaret Hospital, Toronto Health Networks, UJA-Lion of Judah, and the Canadian Council of Christians & Jews.

Her tireless efforts in breast cancer awareness and education garnered her the distinct honor of Council Member of the Order of Canada. "I've always supported my friends in their causes and that's the way it's worked for me," she reveals. "No matter what the cause is, I like to be involved."

Grafstein was raised in the Toronto community of Forest Hill, and she still resides in the same home she grew up in, with her husband, Jerry. A senior adviser to

Canada's famous former prime minister Pierre Trudeau, Jerry has been a senator for more than 20 years, in addition to owning several media companies and working as a corporate lawyer.

While being the wife of a bigwig in Canadian politics could have overshadowed her successes in philanthropy, Grafstein says the couple's own unique pursuits have in fact enriched each other's lives. "A long time ago, Jerry and I agreed that we would

develop our own interests, but if we needed each other, we'd be there," she says. "So when he wants me to attend a political event, I'm there and likewise for Jerry."

In fact, on a more regular basis these days, Jerry can be seen tagging along with his wife at high-profile charitable functions, such as the upcoming Bridgepoint Health Foundation's Fandango! gala, where the duo will serve as cochairs. "He's there to support me and I think he gets a great kick out of seeing me be successful in fundraising," she allows. "And I get a great feeling watching him in action with politics."

One cause that resonates with both Grafstein and her husband is that of fighting antisemitism. Grafstein is actively involved in the Friends of

Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies and was also honored this year by the center as a Woman of Valour. In her speech at the luncheon, Grafstein astutely remarked on the relevance and importance of the work that the Wiesenthal Center does every day. "We must continue to support Simon Wiesenthal and its aims to remove hatred of others from our world and allow all to live in peace," Grafstein told the attendees. "As our ancestors taught, each person can make a difference—if we choose to do so." Grafstein has made an indelible difference. Hopefully, we can follow her distinguished lead.

PAULINE MENKES

In the venerable world of philanthropy, friendship is paramount. Friends invite one another to charitable events, let one another know about new causes, fundraise as a team, and, ultimately, band together to make the act of giving fun and rewarding.

Stellar philanthropist Pauline Menkes is a prime example of this. She has many friends and joins together with them to support as many causes as she can.

Her knack for fostering friendships started in her formative years, when her family moved across the American South. "I was the new kid on the block all of the time," she explains, noting that her father's job as a district manager of dress stores brought the family to such places as Georgia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and South Dakota. "So I had to make friends, and because I was very gregarious, I never had any trouble doing that."

Menkes finally headed off to university in Indiana and on a visit to Toronto to see some family one summer she met Murray Menkes. "And that was that," she recalls. The couple wed in

1949, the same year she graduated. After earning her degree, she briefly taught high school English.

At the time, Murray Menkes worked in the fur business. "People used to say to Murray, 'What's a nice young man like you doing in a business like that?'" she chuckles. So Murray changed directions and launched a land development company. More than 50 years later, Menkes is one of the most prominent builders of homes, condominiums, industrial and commercial



Pauline and Murray Menkes.

properties, and their respective communities in the Greater Toronto area.

The company's success provided the means for Menkes and her husband to donate generously, which they have done for decades. "If I see a need to help somebody, I will," she says. "It's as simple as that."

While children and education are the causes most dear to her, she is a perennial contributor and volunteer for such groups as Weizmann Institute of Science, where she is on the executive board, Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, The Israel Museum, Toronto General Hospital, and Princess Margaret and Mount Sinai hospitals.

While her philanthropic endeavors occupy much of her time, she is also devoted to her growing family. The

mother of three married sons, she now has 11 grandchildren, one great-grandchild, and another one on the way. "I've always wanted to see my children and grandchildren happy and well integrated with one another," she reflects. "And thank God they are."

Having grown up as the lone child in her family's house, she didn't experience many family functions as a kid. Now that her own kinship group is so large, Menkes loves celebrating family functions and keeps her house full of guests on a regular basis. "To this day, I don't like empty houses," she relates. "I like somebody to always be here."

In a manner of speaking, her extended family is the Jewish community. She is very informed about the most pressing issues in the community and participates in many charitable functions. Her efforts were also recognized by a cause she believes in strongly—the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies, which named her as a Woman of Valour. "I feel very gratified to be honored," she says. "The

Simon Wiesenthal Center has a special place in society, and it has become even more relevant today."

Indeed, with antisemitism still strong in many parts of the world, including Canada, the importance of Holocaust education and teaching tolerance to the next generation is pivotal. Menkes, who is exceptionally well read, illustrated this in her insightful speech at the Woman of Valour luncheon.

"We are all concerned about the future of our children and grandchildren here in Canada and around the world," she told guests. "We have a responsibility to put an end to such horrendous (antisemitic) occurrences." In those brief but profound remarks, her message of taking action resonates. It is up to us to heed her call. lifestyles

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