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Philanthropist Morton E. Ruderman dies at 75

Made it his mission to help those with disabilities live life to the fullest

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Morton Ruderman in 1989.

Morton E. Ruderman, who built several businesses and became one of the Jewish community's leading philanthropists, died on Oct. 12 following a lengthy illness. He was 75.

Mr. Ruderman, who had retired to Boca Raton, Fla., after living in Lynnfield, was born during the Depression, the son of a peddler and a seamstress. He was raised in Malden in a household that also included his sister and their grandmother, who was blind.

Every day young Mort would walk his grandmother to and from synagogue. And when he was in his 20s and his father fell ill, Mort took charge of taking him to and from the hospital.

This generosity of spirit – whether with his time or his money – would come to characterize Mr. Ruderman's entire life.

After graduating from Northeastern University with a degree in electrical engineering and serving as second lieutenant in the Army, Mr. Ruderman became Digital Equipment Corporation's first medical technology salesperson.

In 1969, he and three partners founded MEDITECH, a highly successful global health care technology firm. Mr. Ruderman went on to found CRES Development Company, a real estate firm, and several other companies. At the same time, he served as a mentor to many young people, helping them launch their own ventures. "And he always encouraged them to be charitable," said his son Jay.

But it was the work he did to give back to the Jewish community that Mr. Ruderman came to view as his greatest achievement.

Indeed, it was philanthropy that became his primary focus in his later years. He and his wife, Marcia, supported countless causes in the community, particularly organizations

that helped people with disabilities. His charitable endeavors also included the endowment of a Jewish Studies chair at his alma mater, Northeastern University.

With the Ruderman Family Foundation, the couple centered their philanthropy on innovative approaches to helping people with disabilities realize full inclusion in the Jewish community; promoting Jewish continuity; and strengthening the Israel-Diaspora bond.

Jay Ruderman said his father had a simple prescription for business: “One of the most important lessons that I learned from him was you don’t have to be the smartest, you don’t have to be the most talented, but if you work the hardest and you’re persistent, you’ll be successful at whatever you do in life.”

But his father also stressed that success is measured by more than the bottom line. “He ... believed that financial success alone was an empty goal, if one didn’t give back,” Jay said.

And for Ruderman community was always paramount – whether it was Malden, Israel or the Jewish communities in Boston or Florida, where he and his wife spent much of the last years of his life.

But especially Israel. “He was a true Zionist,” said Jay, who recalled that when the Lebanon War broke out in 1982, his father announced to the family at dinner that he was leaving for Israel in a few days.

“He said he would deliver mail, pick oranges, or do whatever was needed to help the country,” Jay said. “My father’s love for Israel and his frequent trips there are probably the reason I’m living and raising my family there today.”

Mr. Ruderman’s most lasting legacy – besides his family (especially his 10 grandchildren in whom he took great delight) – will be his unwavering commitment to helping the most needy in society.

“The reason that our family’s philanthropy began to focus on people with disabilities is because my father felt it was fundamentally unfair that children with special needs did not have access to a Jewish education in Boston,” Jay said.

Less than two weeks before his passing, Mr. Ruderman and his wife met with more than 100 leaders of programs the foundation supports in Israel that focus on improving the lives of those with disabilities, including eight members of Israel’s Knesset.

As Mr. Ruderman was fond of saying, “You always invest in people.”

“That quote says everything about my father,” Jay said. “When I think about how many people my father inspired throughout his life and how many people’s lives he changed for the better, I’m overwhelmed.”

A funeral service on Oct. 16 attracted a standing-room-only crowd of more than 700 including some 20 rabbis, overflowing into the halls of Stanetsky Memorial Chapels in Brookline.

More than the turnout was memorable.

“It’s very unusual that almost everyone came to the cemetery after the service,” said Combined Jewish Philanthropies President Barry Shrage. “As the grave was covered by everyone taking turns with shovels full of dirt, it truly reflected the tremendous respect everyone there had for this man.

“This was a person who didn’t like a lot of publicity, but who did his tzedakah in a humble way, really using charity in ways that changed so many lives. And it was clear that he accomplished the most important thing any parent can: He transferred his values to his children.”

The family will sit shiva beginning the evening of Oct. 22 through Oct. 27.

Mort Ruderman is survived by his wife, Marcia; their three children, Jay, Sharon and Todd; 10 grandchildren; and his sister, Myrna, of Stoughton.

Donations in Mr. Ruderman’s memory may be made to the Alpha-1 Association and Gateways: Access to Jewish Education.