

Lillian Weiss



To understand how Lillian Weiss has helped raise more than \$600,000 for the local branch of the Canadian Cancer Society it is important to know she is a great-grandmother who still wears high-heeled shoes. “I don’t walk, I run,” she said recently. “I’m always in a hurry. I’m always running.”

It is also good to know that Weiss was raised in a family where she was taught dedication to her Jewish faith and duty to the community. Her own mother knocked on doors asking for donations, “even as little as quarter” for needy families.

“You have to give back. You cannot go through life and take and take and take,” says Weiss.

So when she decided to devote herself to volunteerism, the local Grande Dame of fundraising decided to do it *her* way. Rubber-chicken fundraisers with dour speakers were not her style.

One of her greatest legacies to this community is the annual Daffodil Tea and Fashion Extravaganza. Weiss convened the fashion fundraiser for the local Cancer Society in 1990, taking it from an event that raised about \$2,000 to an elegant gala that pulls in \$40,000 for cancer research and support for people living with the disease. Weiss’ husband, Eddie died of cancer in 1976 and she has said, “I watched my husband die for two years. And nobody has to die like that.”

The 55th Annual Daffodil Tea and Fashion Extravaganza will happen this year with a Las Vegas theme at Kitchener’s Delta Hotel. The success of the show is largely due to Weiss’ panache and perseverance. “If I believe in something I don’t take no for an answer . . . the cause to me is very important.”

Weiss, who attended Courtland Avenue Public School and Kitchener Collegiate Institute, began volunteering after getting married in 1951 to her boss Eddie Weiss at the Madison Steel Company. During those early years, Weiss began a close association with the Hadassah-WIZO Council of Kitchener-Waterloo that would last for decades.

Weiss organized the successful Hadassah bazaar for thirty years and also held elegant Israeli designer fashion shows in the late 1970s and early 1980s. When her husband died, Weiss, who has one son Gary, had to decide whether to sell the business in a distress sale or take charge herself. True to form, she took over as president, a position she retains to this day, making her one of the first female business leaders in this community. With her competitors sending out news that the Madison Steel Company was being led by a woman, Weiss went on the offensive mailing out letters to her clients asking them to give her a chance, which they did.

Weiss was also very active in the Confederation Club and served on the board of the Grand River Hospital in 1998-99.

During an appreciation night for Weiss in 1989 at Beth Jacob Synagogue, “this very extraordinary woman” was applauded for her outstanding work as a volunteer and as a “Mother, Grandmother, Businesswoman, a Co-ordinator, a Leader and a Volunteer.” However, it is in Weiss’ own speech that the secret of her success is revealed:

“You see, I do something within myself that is rare – I acknowledge my successes – the ones you have so graciously spoken of this evening. Yes, I did those things, and I can tell you, within myself, I am proud of them all and this pride is as much a part of my success, as it is my secret. I hope you find this refreshing. It’s called honesty. Because you’re not supposed to blow your own horn, you know. My point is that it’s very important to do just that – but not to other people, to yourself. . . . It’s amazing that we teach ourselves and each other to deny the potential within us all. Imagine, God gave each one of us so much, and we teach ourselves to deny these gifts.”

Weiss, who jokes that she is a “rebel with or without a cause” recalled the day about ten years ago that she broke her hip while running to get an elevator during preparations for the Daffodil Tea. After discovering she’d need surgery, the doctor told the local fashion icon that she shouldn’t wear high-heeled shoes anymore, to which she responded: “I’ve been wearing them since I was 11 years old and there’s no way I’m not going to wear high heels.”

Photo courtesy of Lillian Weiss.