



Gary Winnick

The Mitten Drinnen Kid

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LOS ANGELES CA – December 2007 – Gary Winnick’s mother had an expression for him when he was a child—she called him the mitten drinnen kid. Of course, Gary wasn’t the only boy in the world who grew up with that moniker; it’s a fairly common Yiddish expression that means “the kid always in the middle of everything.”

But as far as Gary’s mom was concerned, he was the one and only mitten drinnen kid. Whether there was a fight on the street or a window smashed in the alley around the small, Jewish neighborhood in Queens, New York where he grew up, Gary’s mother just knew her son was somehow involved.

Mixed in with humorous anecdotes about a meeting he had with the Pope—including a conversation they had about the bishop’s red Prada shoes—or a more serious conversation he recently had with Bill Clinton about global warming, Gary recounts the mitten drinnen story to illustrate one very clear fact: at the age of 60, he is still the guy in the middle of everything.

And he’s not the only one who feels this is true. In Thomas Friedman’s recent book, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, a best-seller that analyzes the progress of globalization, Friedman lists Gary, and his former telecom company Global Crossing, as one of the catalysts that helped “flatten” the world by burying a 130,000 mile-long fiber-optic cable under the ocean, connecting six billion people around the world. Whether you’re the type who regularly taps out an e-mail to China on your BlackBerry, or the person who takes advantage of the 10 cent phone calls to Israel, Gary is one of the guys you have to thank.

But these aren’t the only reasons to thank Gary Winnick, nor the only reason he’s still the mitten drinnen kid. As a result of the great fortune he has made with a number of successful business ventures, Gary has been able to give vast amounts of his fortune away through The Winnick Family Foundation, which he runs with the help of his wife Karen, and Foundation Director Rosalie Zalis.

For instance, thousands of children throughout the Los Angeles area can thank Gary and his Foundation for helping bring KOREH L.A. to the Federation. As the first to fund the reading literacy program, Gary helped turn the pilot project into the largest volunteer children’s literacy program in Los Angeles.

Dr. Shlomo Melmed, co-chair of the Federation’s Health Professionals Division, also thanks Gary every day. Dr. Melmed is the Senior Vice-President for Academic Affairs at Cedars-Sinai and oversees the Winnick Family Clinical Research Center, which sponsors four research fellows annually.

The list goes on and on.

Gary is a big supporter of the Federation’s Taglit-birthright Israel program, as well as the Chabad Bais Sonya Gutte School for Girls. Then there’s The Winnick Family Children’s Zoo, The Winnick Hillel House at Syracuse University, and the Arnold & Blanche Winnick Popular Library in the Central Library of downtown Los Angeles. Also in the library is the Karen Winnick Children’s Gallery, named in honor of Mrs. Winnick, herself an author and illustrator of children’s books.



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In addition to their many, many other philanthropic pursuits, the Winnicks are also involved with the Los Angeles Police Foundation Scholarship Fund, through which they provide scholarships for minority students who want to prepare for careers in law enforcement and public safety, but wouldn't otherwise have the opportunity for higher education.

Gary recently hosted a meeting to help rally support for the fund. He says by the end of the meeting, everyone in the room was ready to make a contribution. "I told them, 'Don't take it for granted that you drive around this town and all these wonderful things happen,'" Gary explains. "Don't take it for granted that your kids get a license at eighteen years old and are out gallivanting around West Hollywood at the clubs and then come home safe. Because one day, one of us is going to get a call that we wished we'd never got. And it'll be too late. Take responsibility for the community."

Taking responsibility for the community is something Gary learned by example back when he was still the mitten drinnen kid caught up in one neighborhood scuffle or another. "When I was a boy," he explains, "my mother was active in B'nai B'rith and Hadassah. She was always wrapping up clothing and food to send out. The women came to our house a lot for coffees and I'd always hang around because I loved the homemade cookies."

But it wasn't his love of cookies that left the biggest mark on his young, malleable mind—it was a television show called *The Millionaire*. A popular program in the mid-to-late '50s, *The Millionaire* followed an anonymous philanthropist who would send his agent to a household and deliver a check for \$1 million. Each recipient had some level of hardship in their lives and the show would track the changes the families experienced. Of course, most viewers fantasized about what they'd do with the money if the agent knocked on their door one day.

But not Gary.

"I never wished someone would come into my life and give me a million dollars, because those people had difficult lives and I never wanted to be there," Gary says. Much more interesting was the idea of one day becoming the guy who got to write that big check. "The notion of someone going to a stranger's house and giving someone a million dollars always intrigued me," he says. "I was fascinated with the idea that you could completely transform someone's life from a place of isolation and despair to hope and opportunity. I never realized it until much later, but the part that really impacted me was the notion that you could give somebody something without a quid pro quo."

But there were many obstacles to overcome before he'd earn enough to start giving away his own millions. "I wasn't much of a student," Gary confesses. "Nor was I the best at sports. I never excelled in much of anything as a kid because I didn't take anything seriously." But that would change when he was a freshman in college and his father dropped dead of a sudden heart attack. "He was only 51 years old," Gary explains. "It had a very, very profound impact on my life and my outlook. It was from that moment on that I got serious about my life, because I had no fallback."

After working for the Wall Street firm Drexel Burnham Lambert, in 1985, Gary set up his own financial company, Pacific Capital Group, which was initially involved with leverage buyouts and restructuring. When he moved to Los Angeles, he was 30 years old and just starting to make money. Needing legal advice for his young family, he was introduced to Ed Sanders, a past Federation president and a lawyer who served as Jewish liaison in the Carter White House. Friends to this day, Gary says, "I continue to have the greatest respect and admiration for Ed." (When the Winnick Family Foundation gave the lead gift for the Federation's board room at the 6505 Wilshire Blvd. headquarters, Gary named it The Sanders Board Room.)



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Says Gary, “The advice Ed gave me back then was: ‘A table won’t stand on one leg.’ What he meant was, in life, one needs balance—family, profession, and community. From that moment on, never had a doubt about what my responsibilities were.”

Soon thereafter, Gary joined the board of The Simon Wiesenthal Center, which jump-started his involvement with social and communal organizations. Today, one of his largest financial commitments is to the very same Wiesenthal Center. Rabbi Marvin Hier, dean and founder of the Center, approached Gary when he wanted to build a new museum of tolerance in Jerusalem. “I told him we should go out and get someone like Frank Gehry, someone who could create a transformative museum, someone who could energize people to get behind the project,” Gary says. “I didn’t even know Frank Gehry was Jewish when I suggested him.”

Rabbi Hier did exactly that: He recruited Frank Gehry, and ground has already been broken for the new museum in the Holy Land. “Frank designed a building there that’s mind-boggling,” Gary gushes as he explains that the museum will deal with the history of the State of Israel since 1948.

As part of his leadership gift, Gary was also insistent that the museum include other religions. “Jerusalem is their home, too,” he explains. “It would be ill-advised for us not to.”

Working with Gehry on the museum has led to a friendship that, coincidentally, has benefited both men in their present business pursuits, as they’re now both involved with iCrete, a new concrete company Gary recently founded. With Gehry as an enthusiastic advocate, the two men have infused a once-small company that invented breakthrough concrete technology, with big money, big names and big ideas. As a result, iCrete is quickly changing the way the world produces and thinks about concrete. Already, iCrete had been chosen as the concrete for the Freedom Tower in New York City.

Because it uses up to 40 percent less cement in its concrete mix (cement accounts for six to eight percent of the world’s greenhouse gasses) iCrete is environmentally friendly. As Gary explains, “There are two billion tons of cement made each year in the world, and two billion tons of carbon dioxide released from it. Whether it’s going to make a lot of money is hard to say, but it will have a huge impact on the world. It will stimulate more investment and try to undo some of the damage we’ve done to the environment.”

Gary’s eldest son Adam’s interest in the environment and alternative fuel-related businesses influenced Gary’s decision to buy iCrete. Following Adam’s graduation from Stanford Business School, he joined his father at iCrete. “Two fundamental things really excite me here,” says Gary. “Finding a way to have less reliance on our natural resources and taking some responsibility for the climate. I’m already on the back nine here. But what about my children, and their children? What are we leaving them?”

In the end then, it appears Gary’s business and philanthropic pursuits are meeting in the middle, which is quite appropriate for the guy who loves to be in the middle of it all. As the mitten drinnen kid in him says, “All of us in our own way have an obligation to improve what we can improve for others. I’ve been luckier with money than others, but that doesn’t give me any entitlement other than to do more. People say to me: ‘Look at all the philanthropic things you’ve done over your life.’ As far as I’m concerned, I wish I did ten times more.” He then adds with a sheepish grin, “But, I’m not done yet...”

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