

DONOR SPOTLIGHT: RHODA AND DON MAINS

When Rhoda Wolff and Don Mains met on a blind date in 1952, it sparked a love story that has now spanned 74 remarkable years, and counting. To understand what brought Rhoda and Don together, we must look back to their childhoods, which unfolded nearly 200 miles apart.

Don's mother was born and raised in St. Paul, while his father emigrated from Ukraine in 1904, escaping pogroms with his parents and seven siblings when he was 14. Arriving first in Winnipeg, Canada, Don's father worked in a number of jobs until his early 20s when he began working for a liquor distributor. It was during this time that he met Cecil Greenberg, who lived in St. Paul but was temporarily in Edmonton working at his father's pawn shop. They decided to go into business together in a package liquor operation in Calgary. When Al met Cecil's sister, Daisy, it was true love. They eventually settled in St. Paul and had two children, Mickey and Don.

Al and Cecil then formed a partnership, operating two shoe stores (later many more) called "Tradehome Shoes," and planted roots for their family and business in Minnesota. Cecil died in 1931 and Al became the sole owner of the company. The business survived the Depression and WWII and by 1946, there were nine stores in the chain. That year, Mickey's husband Harold Smith joined the business and Don joined in 1947, together building it to 35 stores by 1976.

Meanwhile, Rhoda's parents, Florence and Robert Wolff, lived in a small Iowa town, where they launched the first of their Wolff's department stores. (Robert's family had come from Vilna and his parents had actually been married by Al Jolson's father in Lithuania). Later, the Wolff family moved to Worthington, MN, opening a new store and joining the town's tiny Jewish community. Though there were just barely enough Jewish families to form a minyan, a train route brought occasional deliveries of kosher food to them from Minneapolis—although, by the time it arrived, it was often already spoiled. Though antisemitism was raging throughout the country, the Wolffs were warmly embraced by their community, and Rhoda's father was widely

respected for his kindness and commitment to helping others. Rhoda recalls that her father was an active supporter of national and international Jewish causes, including the early efforts to establish the State of Israel.

Don grew up engaged in Jewish activities, including at the Jewish Education Center (a precursor to the JCC), though basketball prowess eluded him despite his coach's best efforts. After graduating high school at 16, Don attended MIT and earned an engineering degree by 19. Realizing that engineering wasn't his calling, however, he shifted paths and enrolled at Harvard Business School. Returning to St. Paul after graduating, he worked in his father's shoe store and later served in the Korean War as part of the Medical Service Corps. When he returned from war, he rejoined Tradehome Shoes.

Rhoda, who had grown up working in her father's store, graduated as valedictorian of her Worthington high school class. Although her initial plan was to attend college on the East Coast, with a brother and sister-in-law living in Northern California by this point, she ultimately chose Stanford, where she studied Political Science and American History.

In 1952, a mutual friend suggested to Don that he and Rhoda would make a great match, though his simplistic "sales pitch" of Rhoda as "intelligent and from a good family" didn't spark much intrigue. Still, Don, home on leave, went on the date—and quickly discovered not only Rhoda's intelligence but her kindness, charm, and beauty. Rhoda, equally smitten, hit it off with Don as well, and they married in 1954, settling in Mendota Heights. There, they became active members of Mount Zion congregation, sent their children to Talmud Torah preschool, and later, to Camp Butwin—so rustic at that time, that Rhoda often had to hose them off before letting them inside the house after a day at camp! When they moved to their second home in Mendota, they were closer to where the Jewish community was centered, and their connections and involvement grew.



As Rhoda and Don were building their family and community life, Don's business was on the rise. Together with his brother-in-law, Harold, Don expanded Tradehome's presence across the Midwest, growing the company to 65 stores by his retirement. The business exchanged hands over the years, but Don and Harold eventually repurchased it in 1976 and ran it for 23 more years, ultimately selling it to nine dedicated employees in 1999. Today, Tradehome is 100% employee-owned and boasts over 130 stores nationwide.

As Tradehome grew, so did Rhoda and Don's engagement in the Jewish community. In the 1970s, Rhoda joined the St. Paul Jewish Fund and Council's (now called the St. Paul Jewish Federation) leadership training program, which inspired her commitment to local Jewish causes. By the 1980s, their leadership was widespread and impactful. Both served as presidents of the St. Paul Jewish Federation. Rhoda was just the second woman in that role, and she was the first female president of Jewish Family Service. When Jewish families arrived from the Former Soviet Union in the 1980s, Don was on the JCC board for many years, and volunteered as an ESL tutor for children through JFS. In 2006, She and Don led a successful \$40 million campaign to rebuild Sholom Home in St. Paul, far exceeding their goal. (Rhoda was quick to add that others helped in the effort). Rhoda has also served on the JCRC board. According to Don, one or both of them have served on every Jewish board in St. Paul, with the exception of the Talmud Torah, though they have always supported that St. Paul institution as well. Having grown up in an almost entirely Christian town, Rhoda credits

Don's mother with guiding her in meaningful ways to engage in Jewish community, a lesson she carried throughout her life.

In their non-Jewish philanthropic work, Rhoda established a foundation that honors Rhoda's parents, and the idyllic childhood she remembers having in Worthington. It supports children's needs in Worthington.

In addition to their leadership roles, about 40 years ago, they became active participants in the JCC's group fitness program called 50 and Fit. As not everyone was 50 yet, including the Mains, the staff was searching for a new name for the program that was less off-putting for the participants. It was Don who came up with the winning entry – "Forever Fit" - which has been its name ever since. After retirement, Rhoda and Don could be seen even more regularly at the JCC, participating in group exercise, the JCC Men's Club and the Creative Writing program.

The Mains first visited Israel in 1971, a deeply emotional experience. Rhoda remembered her parents' heartbreak in 1954, when they could only glimpse the Western Wall from afar due to Jordanian control. Standing at the Wall, Rhoda wept not only for herself but for her father, who had longed to touch the ancient stones of Jerusalem himself but was never able to.

Today, Don and Rhoda remain dedicated to their values and to inspiring future generations. "If you are blessed with a comfortable life, you must help those in need," they advise. Don added, "We were fortunate to be born in this country. We have an obligation to help our fellow Jews, and we should do it freely and willingly. Generations have survived because Jews help Jews." For the Mains, the satisfaction of giving has always far surpasses spending on themselves.

Interview conducted by Tamar Fenton and Michael Waldman, November 4, 2024