

WINNICK FAMILY *Foundation*

Donor Draws on Jewish Traditions of Giving to Promote Tolerance for All

By Elizabeth Green
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As a boy in the 1950's, Gary Winnick sat glued to every episode of the television show "The Millionaire," transfixed by the stories of needy people and the wealthy individual who helped them out. Unlike many of his friends, though, he liked to imagine how it would feel to be the man who wrote the check and gave it away, not the person on the receiving end.

He doesn't have to wonder anymore.

Mr. Winnick, who runs Global Crossing, a telecommunications giant, can write lots of checks. He is worth \$3.2-billion, according to a recent issue of *Forbes* that placed him 72nd on the magazine's list of the 400 richest Americans. And he supports many needy people and organizations, with gifts to more than 200 charities a year for projects as varied as mobile health clinics and university renovations.

In 2000, Mr. Winnick donated and pledged a total of \$77-million, including a \$40-million commitment to the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles to help open a major new institute in Jerusalem championing peace and tolerance.

Last year was his biggest yet for philanthropy, and Mr. Winnick says he is just getting started. "We're still young," the 53-year-old says of the family Foundation he runs with his wife of 28 years. The Gary & Karen Winnick Foundation, in Beverly Hills, Calif., has about \$100-million in assets.

He and Mrs. Winnick, a children's-book writer and illustrator, are planning big gifts in the arts, education, and medicine, he says. They also support mentor programs, libraries, and worldwide literacy and humanitarian projects. Both Jewish, they are active in Jewish causes.

"Tzedakah," the Jewish tradition of giving, is the backbone of Mr. Winnick's philanthropy. "Listening to my mother talk about organizing a fund-raising drive for the temple, or talking with her girlfriends from B'nai B'rith -- the canasta crowd -- I'm a product of it," he says.

And he was deeply affected by the death of his father, who died of a heart attack when Mr. Winnick was 18. "It's the memory of that that inspires me to do the most that I can within the time frame that I have," he says. "I want to be the best I can be."

Technology Earnings

Mr. Winnick's doesn't plan to give all his money away before he dies, but he says he hopes to leave a strong philanthropic legacy for his family.

Mr. Winnick earned a healthy salary running Pacific Capital Group, a merchant bank. But the big money rolled in after he started Global Crossing. The company runs a fiber-optic network that provides Internet, data, voice, and image communications worldwide. Less than four years old, publicly traded Global Crossing has raised more than \$20-billion in capital and has 17,000 employees.

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“I came to believe if we could accomplish that kind of success in our business lives, perhaps we could achieve even greater success in the pursuit of world tolerance,” Mr. Winnick said at a Wiesenthal Center gathering where he announced his \$40-million pledge -- and then raised \$5-million more from the guests assembled in his honor.

The Jerusalem gift comes at a time when the continuing conflict between Palestinians and Jews in Israel hinders the latest attempt at creating a peace process. The new institute will focus on that issue, through both its museum and conference center, but it will also deal with other groups in its attempt to promote tolerance of diversity.

“Whether we’re next-door neighbors, whether we’re brothers or sisters, or whether we’re enemies, we need to come to a middle ground,” says Mr. Winnick. “That means we must have tolerance, and until we have tolerance we cannot have peace.”

The Jerusalem museum will use the latest interactive technology to examine that ideal in relation to contemporary issues. Jewish history will be explained through dramatic reenactments of key events, and hands-on exhibits will challenge visitors to think about how they would approach critical issues facing society.

Rabbi Marvin Hier, founder of the Wiesenthal Center and its Museum of Tolerance, expects the new museum to be a major presence in Israel. “It was a wonderful thing to give a vote of confidence to a small organization,” he says. “The Wiesenthal Center doesn’t have the history of a Harvard or a Yale or a Columbia or a Sloan-Kettering. There’s a lot of competition out there for \$40-million.”

But Mr. Winnick has a long history with the center, going back to 1980 when he met Rabbi Hier at a dinner and was introduced to Mr. Wiesenthal, a Holocaust survivor. At that time, the center was focused on prosecution of Nazi war criminals, but it now attempts to foster tolerance and understanding among all people through its museum, its efforts to monitor hate groups online, and, among other things, its training sessions for police officers and teachers. Its annual budget is \$26-million.

Impressed with the group, Mr. Winnick quickly joined the board, and has remained a trustee for the last 20 years. “Before he reached the status of being a billionaire, Gary was always very generous and forthcoming,” says Rabbi Hier, the group’s dean. “Gary was always there for us.”

Initial Rejection

Mr. Winnick initially rejected the invitation to make the first big pledge for a new center in Jerusalem because he didn’t think the world needed another place to study the Holocaust, which he said the proposal then included.

Instead, Mr. Winnick told Rabbi Hier, “I would be interested in a collaboration with the Wiesenthal Center that would involve issues unrelated to the Holocaust and would involve issues of world peace.”

Says Rabbi Hier, “Gary wanted to make sure that the focus in Jerusalem would be what we consider to be the critical issue facing Israel -- that is, the need to build a more tolerant society in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims can live together.”

That’s how a \$30-million idea grew into the Winnick Institute, a Project of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, now estimated to cost \$120-million.

Mr. Winnick suggested that the renowned architect Frank Gehry, who is Jewish, design the space, and Mr. Gehry agreed. He is working on a design now that will accommodate 4,000 visitors a day.

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Mr. Winnick's thoughtfulness about the project is typical of his philanthropy, says David J. Steinberg, president of Long Island University.

A Roslyn, N.Y., native, Mr. Winnick is a graduate of that university's C.W. Post Campus, and remembers that it felt like a home during a very difficult time -- as a freshman, when his father died. He has given the campus \$11-million for scholarships and two building projects: one to restore a historic mansion that functions as the centerpiece of the campus, the other to modernize and expand the student cafeteria.

And when he is interested in a project, he doesn't hold back, say charity officials who have worked with him.

Nancy A. Aossey, president of the International Medical Corps, a Los Angeles group, says that Mr. Winnick came through quickly with the money when he offered to support the group's mobile-clinic program in and around Kosovo in 1999.

"That crisis escalated very quickly, and suddenly there were hundreds of thousands of people pouring over the border on foot," she says. "The timeliness of his donation was critical." Mr. Winnick gave \$100,000 and raised \$100,000 more from associates.

That's not a lot of money for Mr. Winnick, but Ms. Aossey says it's what her group needed at the time.

"We're living in a world where people through air travel and through communication are much more linked to each other than ever in the history of the world," says Mr. Winnick, speaking about what motivates his giving to causes like the Kosovo crisis and the Wiesenthal Center. "We as people in the world have to learn to live with and respect other people."

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