

The Legacy of Harry Kay

Successful entrepreneur's philanthropic legacy helps build collaborations across communities

Published in 2007 by Iric Nathanson, a freelance writer in Minneapolis who specializes in articles on local Jewish history

His name is attached to one of Minnesota's major charitable enterprises, but Harry Kay, himself, remains something of a mystery to the current generation of community leaders.

"Harry deserves to be remembered, but we know so little about him. The written record just isn't there," said Linda Schloff, former Executive Director of the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest.



Harry Kay

More than 20 years after his death, the Foundation established by Kay continues to make significant financial contributions to the Twin Cities Jewish community, the University of Minnesota and several key organizations in Israel.

When the details of Kay's life are put together, they tell the story of a self-made man, who pulled himself out of boyhood poverty through sheer determination, hard work and a finely developed sense of business acumen.

Kay was born in Winnipeg in 1917, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants who struggled through the Depression, like many of their contemporaries. To help support his family, he had to drop out of school before graduating. For a while, he worked with his father in a small diner, where he got to know and understand the food industry.

"Like most successful entrepreneurs, Harry saw a need in the market place that wasn't being filled and he was determined to fill that need," said Sam Kaplan, a former Harry Kay Foundation board member. "That was the secret of his success."

The unmet need had to do with potatoes and their use by large food service organizations. At the diner in Winnipeg, Harry had known about potatoes and the tedious work of peeling them one-by-one. He realized that large organizations, hospitals and other institutional settings needed a source of processed potatoes that could speed up food preparation in their

commercial kitchens. With his on-the-job experience in hand, Kay developed a way to process potatoes and invented the machinery to do what had been hand work up until then. In 1953, the aspiring entrepreneur moved his family to St. Paul and scraped together enough money to build his first small potato processing plant. By the time of his death, 30 years later in 1983, Kay had created Processed Potatoes Inc., one of the state's most fully integrated enterprises. "Harry owned the farm fields in the Red River Valley, where the potatoes were grown, he owned the trucks that transported them to the Twin Cities and he owned the plant where the potatoes were processed," Kaplan explained. "The business had become very successful."

But the early years were not easy, according to Kay's daughter, Bonnie. "We moved here when I was three," Bonnie Kay recalled. "At first, we lived in a small apartment in the attic of my grandmother's house, and then we moved around a lot to one rental place after another."

Not until the early 1960s, when his business was starting to prosper, did Harry move his family into their own home in St. Paul's Highland Park neighborhood.

"I respected my father a lot," Bonnie said. "He was honest and direct, and very much the 'captain of the ship.' But he was like a lot of other men of his generation; he didn't talk about his feelings. There was a part of him that he kept very private."

"Harry's word was always his bond," said Howard Gelb a long-time family friend. "If he made an agreement with you, you didn't need it in writing, because Harry always followed through on his commitments."

"He had strong opinions and he was more than willing to express them. You certainly would not describe him as shy and retiring," Gelb added.

"Harry was one of those straight-forward, no-nonsense kind of guys without an ounce of pretension. He was not in the least impressed with status or position," Sam Kaplan observed.

Kaplan tells the story of the phone conversation with President Ronald Reagan at a luncheon at Oak Ridge Country Club. Kaplan and a group of friends had organized the luncheon to honor Harry and they decided that they would surprise him by arranging for a phone call from the President while the lunch was in progress.

"The day of the luncheon arrived and we set up with the phone on speaker, so everyone could hear the conversation," Kaplan recalled. "We had everything arranged in advance with the White House staff and we knew that the President would have a script in front of him. The call came in and we put the President on the line, and he commented about potatoes and how they had made Harry wealthy. 'Harry, that's a lot of potatoes,' the President said jokingly. But then Harry responded in a very natural way. 'So tell me, Mr. President, what kind of a day are you having there in Washington?' Of course, Reagan was totally non-plussed. No one had prepared

him for that kind of question. But that was Harry. Talking to the President was no big deal for him.”

In his later years, as he became more successful, Harry became engaged in community affairs, according to his daughter, Bonnie. “His Jewish identity became increasingly important to him,” she observed. “That identity may have always been there, but he couldn’t act on it while he was growing the business. In the beginning, there wasn’t time for much more than work. We didn’t get to see a lot of him. He would come home for dinner, and then go back to the plant to oversee the second shift.”

Towards the end of his life, after he was diagnosed with cancer, Kay went about organizing his estate in a very deliberate way so it could have a long-term impact, according to Howard Gelb. “Harry had an honest sense of his own mortality so he put a lot of time and effort into setting up the Foundation because he knew it would outlast him,” Gelb recalled.

“During the few years that he was able to be actively involved in the Foundation, he relied on the advice of others but he was very much his own man,” said Gelb, who served on the initial Harry Kay Foundation board. “There were certain causes that were important, inside and outside of the Jewish community, and he made sure that those causes were supported.” Kay had only a short time to see the results of his work. In 1983, he died at the age of 66.

Since its inception more than 20 years ago, the Harry Kay Foundation has provided over \$25 million for a variety of causes in Minnesota and Israel. Major beneficiaries have included the Minneapolis Jewish Federation, the United Jewish Fund and Council of St. Paul (UJFC) and the Sholom Community Alliance.

Today, the foundation’s benefactor may be best known locally for the leadership training institute that bears his name. “The Harry Kay Leadership Institute has become the key vehicle for training the emerging generation of leaders in our community,” said Joshua M. Fogelson, the Minneapolis Federation’s CEO. “It is a fitting tribute to Harry Kay’s vision.”

As a joint project of the Federation and the UJFC, the Institute helps foster inter-city cooperation. “That is one of our key objectives,” said Marvin Pertzik, a Foundation board member. “We want to encourage closer ties between the two communities.” Other joint projects funded by the Harry Kay Foundation include the Twin Cities Jewish Population Study and the Federations’ website www.jewishminneapolis.org.

“Harry Kay’s legacy continues to make an important difference here in St. Paul and throughout the Twin Cities,” added Eli Skora, Executive Director of the United Jewish Fund and Council of St. Paul. “The Foundation does its work quietly and without a lot of fanfare. It walks softly but makes a big impact.”