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A beacon of light in a corona-darkened world

Naomi Stuchiner is awarded the Israel Prize for Lifetime Achievement

By BENJY SINGER

In response to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declaring war on the novel coronavirus, some Israelis decided to look outwards and fight for Israel on the front lines. A winner of this year's Israel Prize for Lifetime Achievement, Naomi Stuchiner, was one of those unique individuals. Since the coronavirus crisis broke out, Stuchiner has been working tirelessly – “harder now than ever before” – looking out for the children and families of Beit Issie Shapiro from her home in Ra'anana.

When talking to 72-year-old Stuchiner, originally from Johannesburg, South Africa, it is clear where her passion to give children and people with disabilities equal rights and opportunities comes from. “My father Issie Shapiro was an amazing and inspirational man. He showed us that we must defend the weak in society and stand up to challenges in the process. I am just carrying on my father's dream and bringing his vision to Israel.”

She says that her father believed that disability cannot be seen as a matter of shame for the families. “I believe that we have succeeded in making young people with disabilities part of the community – it is not a matter of shame anymore.” “When we started 40 years ago, there was no alternative to institutionalizing people with intellectual disabilities. We were the first in providing an alternative for parents to keep their children within the community.”

“My father believed that we need to change people's perspectives – people with disabilities should have equal rights and opportunities – we have a responsibility to make that happen. My fathers' goal was to change the attitude of Israeli society - which we are doing.”

Stuchiner believes that you can empower young people through teaching, which she is currently doing using zoom. Indeed, the evening before our telephone interview, she had given an online lecture to 11 women about women leadership, at Ariel University. “I want to make young women role models in their communities. If you make people feel they are important – they will make a difference,” she says. “Every one of us has the power to make a difference.” Stuchiner is a big believer that change is possible only when you believe you can make a difference. “We must take the steps – to actualize our good intentions – it's not enough to just have good intentions.”

She sees being awarded the Israel Prize for lifetime achievement, on a collective, rather than individual level, as recognition of the importance of



Naomi Stuchiner, the founder of Beit Issie Shapiro in Ra'anana. (Courtesy)

her mission and how far the field has developed since she established Beit Issie Shapiro 40 years ago.

“When Rafi Peretz, the minister of education, tweeted I had won the prize, all hell broke loose for weeks” she says, adding that “every one one of those 500 people who congratulated me is part of a mosaic.”

“It's not a one-man-show. I am so privileged to have worked with outstanding people. We are all interconnected in needing to make a change – the children and young adults, their families, our dedicated staff – stretching themselves to find solutions. Then you have our board, volunteers, lay leaders, donors, government, colleagues and the community at large – they all have had a role!”

WHAT IS evident when speaking to Stuchiner, is how much she believes in the people she is working with and, more importantly, how much she wants them to believe in themselves. She says, “I have learnt more from people with disabilities – and their parents - than from most other people.”

Stuchiner is proud to say that she was a trailblazer in integrating young people into the mainstream. “Here at BIS we were pioneers, providing community services – not just a range of services for children and young people, but also support to the families – we also give the children and families opportunities – they have choices.”

Of the 500 messages received on her winning the Israel prize, the most meaningful was from Miriam Peretz. “Miriam calling me meant so much as I really admire her,” Stuchiner says. “We had a half an hour conversation and I realized

that we see our roles similarly - we spoke about our joint responsibility in empowering young people to believe they can make a change.”

After speaking to her, she realized that they had more in common than just the Israel Prize. “My son told me that he was in the same pre-army unit as her son, Uriel of blessed memory, who was killed in service.”

Stuchiner points to two moving stories of Beit Issie Shapiro graduates that show how her – and her father's – aim of keeping young people with disabilities in the mainstream is succeeding.

The first was her attending the wedding of Ori Schreiber. He had cerebral palsy and was with BIS initially in their nursery and then he went to a regular school, but still came back to Beit Issie Shapiro for hydrotherapy and sports. “This was one of the most moving weddings I have ever attended – we danced at his wedding like we had never danced before,” she says.

The second story Stuchiner referred to was that of Ronny Aharon, a girl at BIS who represented them, together with her family at the AIPAC Conference in Washington in 2017. “It was such a big honor for us at BIS – it was really wild. To see one of our BIS children on the main stage in front of 18,000 people – I will never forget that scene.”

Stuchiner makes it clear she perceives the role of BIS as to serve the whole spectrum of Israeli society. “We also serve the Arab sector here in Israel, just like we serve the Jewish sector.”

In 2001, BIS set up the Sindian Centre, Israel's first early intervention center in the Arab sector in Israel, and in 2007, the Family Advancement Center was established to better serve the needs

of families with children with disabilities. Stuchiner was very proud to say, “both centers serve the Southern Triangle Region of Israel, which comprises 120,000 residents including in the towns of Kalansuwa, Taiba, Tira, Jaljulya, the villages of Kefar Bara and Kefar Kassem and the regional council Zemmer.”

Stuchiner takes immense pride in how the aim of BIS is to integrate their young people into broader society and not to institutionalize them, is being actualized. Since 2002, Beit Issie Shapiro has offered courses through the Inclusive University. This unique program is given under the auspices of Beit Issie Shapiro's Trump International Institute of Continuing Education in Developmental Disabilities and in collaboration with Bar Ilan University and other academic institutions in Israel.

The Inclusive University project, she said, is to equalize opportunities for people with complex learning and adjustment disabilities to benefit from higher education in an academic setting, develop skills and personal empowerment as well as further social inclusion of the students with disabilities with mainstream students.

Stuchiner says “BIS has 16 inclusive





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programs in Israeli universities. The Inclusive University program was a pioneer in developing methods of cognitive accessibility and academic material simplification." "These courses have given 1,940 graduates an opportunity for self-worth, pride and an ability to continue studying. Many of the graduates have been empowered in their work situation and in their personal lives," says Stuchiner proudly.

Since 2011, Beit Issie Shapiro and Israel Elwyn, in partnership with the Ruderman Family Foundation and the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles, joined forces and turned the idea of "Nothing About Us Without Us" into a practical program, where groups of people with intellectual disabilities work to promote local and national projects and issues of importance.

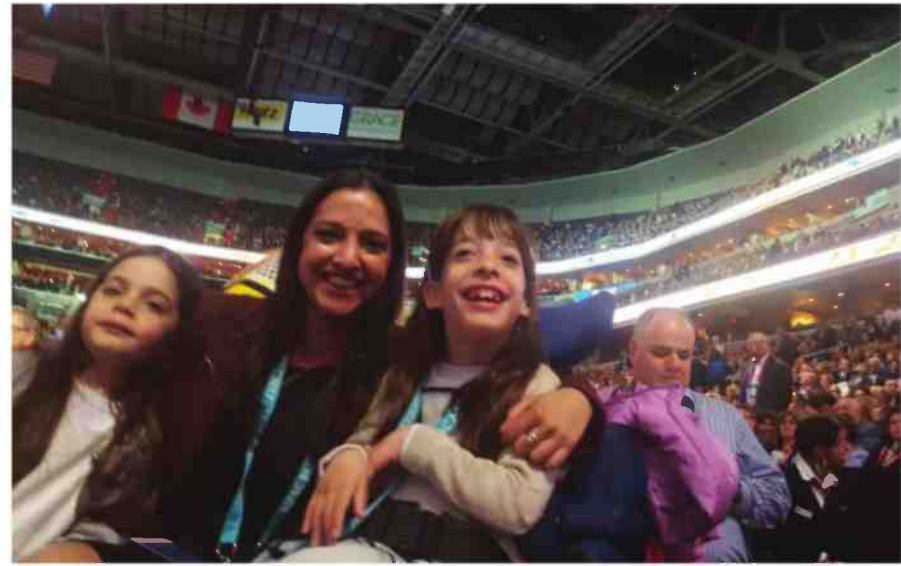
Each group is led by a self-advocate leader guided by a facilitator, both of whom have been trained and receive ongoing guidance through this program. In addition a national leadership group works to achieve change on a national policy level. Their activity has



Ori Schreiber (right) at his wedding. (Courtesy)

led to exciting and important breakthroughs, including a groundbreaking amendment to the Legal Capacity and Guardianship Law passed by the Knesset's Ministerial Legislative Committee.

Stuchiner explains how their young adults know their rights and are able to defend themselves. "Our children have formed self-advocacy groups. They are



Ronny Aharon at AIPAC with sister Ofri and mother Betty Kulbak-Aharon (left). (Courtesy)

like a movement - we make them aware what their rights are." They have even been to the Knesset," she says proudly.

How has the coronavirus affected BIS and how have they responded?

Says Stuchiner, "since the outbreak of corona, I am working harder now than ever before. Coronavirus has made me spring into action. I myself am in self-quarantine due to my age and health condition, but I have not rested - apart from Shabbat - to support, ensure BIS's effective responses to the current crisis."

"I see our response to coronavirus on both a micro and macro level," Stuchiner says.

"Kids come every day for therapy - they are helped by people they love, care for them. Due to corona, the schools are closed, including the early intervention program. Kids now have no daily routine and worst of all, they don't understand why. Parents who themselves are under tremendous pressure and maybe out of work, have to look after them at home 24/7."

"The kids don't understand why and our BIS staff are themselves family people who have to look after their own families and children at home - we are literally in emergency mode."

Stuchiner described their response: "We are providing online classes and resources on YouTube." Also, she emphasized "we are a resource for people with disabilities and their families abroad - We have an emergency hotline for distressed parents" - serving Arabic-, Hebrew- and English-speaking communities.

On a macro level, Stuchiner goes on, BIS is part of Israel's non-profit sector and the coronavirus crisis has hit them hard. "BIS has lost \$2 million so far as a result of corona. You can't detach BIS from what's happening to the rest of the nonprofit world in Israeli society. "In Israel, 500,000 people work in the non profit sector, which accounts for 14% of the workforce."

Stuchiner is extremely concerned with how the weaker segments of Israeli society are being affected by coronavirus - 25% of the non profits have had to close down, she points out. "What are elderly people supposed to do?" she asks. "They have little access to food, social media or tech.

"What will happen to the aged, the battered women, the people with disabilities, the ill, and those at high risk?" she asks.

"The nonprofits take care of them. If we don't have the funding, what will happen to the vulnerable members of our society? Who will care for them? We can't just focus on the private sector and government services!" she believes. "The BIS children and families need us - we can't wait for the government to find a solution - we must also provide a plan for after the coronavirus crisis and we are working on this now."

In her typically optimistic and positive spirit, she concludes, "coronavirus has taught us we are all connected, and reliant on each other - this has always been our approach at BIS - and now more than ever."

Even though Stuchiner retired from her executive role at BIS in 2010, she is still a board member and involved in creating new services and fundraising. She recently helped establish an emotional well-being institute, which she believes is crucial for the intellectual and emotional development of their children.

For me personally, speaking to Stuchiner in this difficult period was a real inspiration. I could hear in her voice her passion and drive to reach out and make a difference. Her commitment to young people and the vulnerable in society - empowering them to become independent - is a real lesson for us all. Her groundbreaking work at Beit Issie Shapiro has changed the lives of millions of young people and their families in Israel and around the world, making her truly worthy of being awarded this auspicious prize.

Stuchiner with a young girl at Beit Issie Shapiro. (Courtesy)

