

A JNF Virtual Production
NEGEV GALA
In Support Of The Climate Solutions Prize

Honouring Gail Asper O.C., O.M., LL.D.
& Dr. Michael Paterson

A portion of the proceeds will support the
World's Jewish Museum and Jewish Child
and Family Service



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JP&N interview:

Michael Paterson and Gail Asper talk about their lives and why they've given their support to this year's JNF Negev Gala

By **BERNIE BELLAN**

On June 2 the Jewish National Fund will be honouring Gail Asper and Dr. Michael Paterson, a couple that has long been associated with many aspects of the Jewish community, whether it's been Gail's storied philanthropic endeavours or Michael's years of service on the board of Jewish Child & Family Service.

Recently I had the opportunity to interview Michael and Gail via Zoom. Gail was a little bit late joining in, so I thought I'd take the opportunity to ask Michael to give me an update as to what his sons, Stephen and Jonathan, are doing these days, and to ask Michael about his own activities in the scientific realm, which has been his lifelong passion.

"Jonathan is now a lawyer," (with Duboff Edwards Schachter) "and Stephen is pursuing his PhD at St. Mary's University in Halifax," Michael said.

"He's studying invasive species," Michael added. "He's studying earthworms."

Now, while I would hardly have thought earthworms would be considered an "invasive species" per se, Michael explained that "they all come from Europe."

"Really?" I asked. (You never know what you're going to learn when you set about to interview someone without any pre-conceived questions.)

"Yah, pretty much," Michael added. "There are a few native earthworms that are primarily in the Yukon, which is where he's heading this summer."

Later in the interview, I had the chance to ask Gail about her own attitude to Stephen's area of study. I don't think it would surprise you to learn that she's not a real earthworm aficionado.

"I hate earthworms!" she offered by way of answering how she feels about Stephen's chosen area of study.



Michael Paterson & Gail Asper

"We have this Covid dog," she continued. "And every night we take him out for a walk and I'm seeing foxes and coyotes, deer and raccoons – and huge owls. Lately the sidewalk has been littered with disgusting, fat earthworms. It's so disgusting."

But, I added, "I didn't know they immigrated here from Europe. That's so interesting" - to which Gail added this rejoinder: "And no good can come of it! They should go back where they came from!"

As for Michael's own particular area of interest, I asked him whether he's still involved in the study of freshwater lakes. He said he is, with the "experimental lakes area" in "Northwestern Ontario, where we basically study the effect of human activities on water quality."

The experimental lakes area encompasses 58 different lakes in a part of Ontario which has remained largely untouched by human habitation and which offers an excellent area in which scientists can study the effects that introducing various elements have on otherwise pristine bodies of water.

The experimental lakes project, however, was in danger of being shut down completely as recently as 2012, Michael explained.

At that point Gail joined in the discussion and noted that Michael played a pivotal role in keeping the project alive. It is now under the auspices of the International Institute for Sustainable Development, which is a private institute (that receives funding from the federal government as well as a number of private sector sources). The experimental lakes project also receives funding from the provinces of Ontario and Manitoba.

The fact that Michael Paterson is a scientist who is deeply concerned with the effects that humans have on freshwater lakes is significant in understanding the particular project that he and Gail have now

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Community news

Michael & Gail (Continued from page 1.)

prior to our next issue's being published, as I told her I was also going to be doing a story about Aharon Harlap, the famous music composer, who just happens to be a cousin of Gail's (once removed; he was actually a first cousin to her father).

Turning to the upcoming gala, which will be viewed virtually once again (as was last year's gala, in which Ted and Harriet Lyons were honoured), I told Gail and Michael that I already had a heads up about what will be featured in the gala. (Keith Levit had spilled the beans to me.)

I said that I was told that this gala was a major production that will include some fabulous musical numbers.

"Yup, that's all we know," Gail noted. "We don't know what they're doing."

"You don't?" I asked in astonishment.

"No," she said. "Big surprise."

"Because I do," I said. "But I'm not going to tell you."

"Don't tell us anything," Gail insisted. "We heard a snippet when we were there for our taping, but we closed the door because we didn't want to hear anything. So we're going to be sitting on June 2nd with our little box of hummus and cookies or whatever they (the JNF) give you, and it'll all be new for us."

With that as preamble to the edgy interview that I had really wanted to conduct, I launched into what I thought would be a really tough question: "You must be a really hard 'get'," I suggested. "How many times have you been asked to be the honourees for the JNF Gala in the past?"

"We actually have not been asked," Gail answered. "I mean our family was honoured a few years ago. The Asper Foundation and my family were honoured, so we were up on stage a few years ago. So, this was the first official ask for us. I didn't think we needed to be asked because the Foundation has been recognized – and we're part of that. But, it was with a lot of trepidation (that we accepted) because along with the honour comes a lot of responsibility."

"I happen to be very fond of the work the Jewish National Fund does," Gail continued, "and the project this year – the Climate Solutions Prize, is also meaningful, so we felt it was appropriate to accept this wonderful honour."

I turned to Michael to ask him about his own involvement in fund raising for the Jewish community. I noted that I had received a phone call from him back in the fall when he was phone soliciting for the Jewish Child & Family Service. I wondered whether that was something he's been doing on a regular basis, i.e., phone soliciting for different organizations?

"Oh yah," he answered. "Frankly, I don't know why I'm being honoured. I am involved with a bunch of organizations. I sat on the board of Jewish Child & Family Service, on and off, for over 20 years, and I was the chair of the board many years ago," to which Gail added, "and he was the first non-Jewish chair of the board, for which he received a Shem Tov Award."

Of course, Gail being Gail, she had to add: "He received the Shem Tov Award for being the only chair who started and ended the meetings on time. He was so beloved!"

Michael also observed that, in addition to being on the JCFS board for many years, "I was also on the (Jewish) Federation board. I've been on the Federation Allocations Committee in the past, I've been on the (Jewish) Foundation's Allocations Committee." In addition to those Jewish organizations, Michael noted that "another organization I've been very involved with has been the Nature Conservancy of Canada. I've been on the regional board and the national board, on and off, since 2000. I'm currently the regional co-chair and I have been the chair in the past."

He added that he's also been involved with the Public Interest Legal Centre "on their board."

I said that I wanted to take a step back and ask how Gail and Michael had met? (I had remembered reading that they had met at university, but I had the wrong university in mind when I asked whether they met in Halifax?)

"We met at the Elizabeth Dafoe Library," Gail corrected me. "We both worked part time there. It was 1979. I was in Arts and Mike was in Science."

I asked whether they met in the stacks?

"That would be a good story," Gail retorted: "Love among the stacks. No, I was actually in 'circulation'," (to which I had to comment: "What a great double entendre"), "but every time Mike from 'reserve' would walk by, all my friends would look at cute 'Mike from reserve' as he bounded by to his little reserve area, and Thursday nights, for 20 minutes, we had our break together in the cafeteria. I got to know him, he got to know me, I would give him rides home; I really liked him so I asked him out on a date in March of the following year (1980). I asked him out to a Jets game in March – and it was a very wonderful night, but like, nothing happened, so I thought, 'Okay, I guess we're just going to be friends' and I was going off to Europe with Jonathan Kroft – my dear friend – just a platonic friend, and I went to the Trevi Fountain in Rome, and there's a song: 'Three Coins in the Fountain' so I stood on the edge of the Trevi Fountain, and I sang that

involved themselves with through the JNF. (More about that later.)

I said to Gail that there was an interesting synchronicity in my talking to her

song, and I wished for true love with Michael James Paterson – threw my coin in the fountain, and the next day I went to American Express to pick up my mail, and there was a letter responding to a letter I had written to Mike where I expressed my affection for him and wondered what was wrong with him to not feel the same way about me – and he wrote back, saying 'I thought anyone traveling in Europe with a guy is otherwise engaged – and, if you're not, let's get together'," and so, when Gail did get back they did get together and, as she noted: "We've been together ever since."

"We got married in June of '84," Gail noted. "I was going to law school here."

Mike explained that he had been "doing a Masters in Indiana" prior to their getting married, "and then we went to Halifax where I started on my PhD at Dalhousie."

It was in Halifax also that Gail articulated as a lawyer. "So it was in Halifax that we started our married life together," she said. "We had no family, we didn't know anyone. It wasn't a bad way to start out," she observed.

The discussion turned to politics and how both Michael and Gail have been able to navigate the sometimes choppy waters of dealing with politicians of different stripes (and bureaucrats) at various times in their lives – Michael in his efforts to keep the experimental lakes area alive, and Gail, most notably in her efforts to get the Human Rights Museum built.

Michael described his experiences to me, but in the end he put it succinctly: "It's not that I don't have political opinions, but I like to think that I'm reasonably respectful of different points of view."

Although ordinarily one might have expected that, this having been an interview that would be published just prior to the JNF Gala, I would have led off my questions by asking about the particular project for which Michael and Gail agreed to lend their support by becoming this year's Winnipeg honourees for the Gala. Instead, in a short piece following this article, you can read about the Climate Solutions Prize, which is that project.

For Gail, the notion of contributing to further scientific study in an area as important as the climate crisis is an extension of what the Asper Foundation has been doing for years with various Israeli institutions of higher learning, she observed.

"I'm involved with Hebrew U, we've supported Tel Aviv University, Ben Gurion (University), lots of other places. It's strengthening Israel – and that's aligned with our values; it's helping the world, and that's aligned with our values. I like to think that Israel can come up with something that will help the world – and that's good for Israeli 'hasbara'."

As well, Gail noted that she "likes the idea of the JNF getting back to its 'roots' ("no pun intended," she added), "and doing something more environmentally focused."

For his own part, Michael noted that some years back he was invited to attend a water quality conference in Israel sponsored by the JNF. "I had the opportunity to meet some of the researchers on water quality in Israel and they were really an amazing, inspiring group. It was a reminder of all the research power in Israel."

"Of course, I'm deeply concerned about the environment and one of the biggest threats to the environment is climate change. It's stating the obvious, but any threat to the environment is a threat to all of us if we care about the future – of our economy, our health, our way of life, our well being in general. I've given my professional career to protecting the environment, so the idea of bringing together Israeli innovation and research power and the environment is very attractive, so when the JNF brought this project to us for us to lend our support – of course, it made a lot of sense."

In addition, some of the proceeds from the Gala will be going to JCFS, along with the World's Jewish Museum in Tel Aviv (which is also a project in which Gail is deeply involved).

About the Climate Solutions Prize

The Climate Solutions Prize, powered by JNF Canada, aims to curb the climate crisis by channeling the creative ingenuity of Israel, also known as the Start-Up Nation, with a \$1-million annual prize for the best and most impactful climate solutions.

The initiative is becoming not just Israel's largest incentive prize, but a platform and catalyst for change. This can preserve our collective work, and world, for future generations while helping develop Israel into a global leader in clean technology.

The Climate Solutions Prize is a natural extension of JNF's core environmental mission rooted in afforestation, water management and green Research and Development, as well as a reaffirmation of its guiding principle of Tikkun Olam (repairing the world). Partners in execution include Keren Kayemeth Lelsrael (KKL) who is providing matching funds, as well as Start-Up Nation Central (SNC) and the Peres Center for Peace and Innovation (PCPI). Applications will be vetted down to a small group of finalists by teams from KKL, JNF and PCPI and the finalists will be chosen by a high-profile international judging panel. Winners will be announced during a gala ceremony as part of a Green Mission in Israel, which will include a Climate Innovation Festival showcasing Israeli and global ideas and innovations.