

BY ALIZA DAVIDOVIT

With his tiny fingers cocked like a toy gun, the precocious 4-year-old boy runs into the room, aims his imaginary bullets, says “bang, bang,” and then “shoots” my interview subject mid-interview. The playful child then runs to his grandfather, Bertie Lubner, one of South Africa’s most successful notables, gives him a big hug, and then engages his adoring patriarch for several minutes in childlike banter with spirited questioning. He is a black child, adopted by Lubner’s daughter. And with dimples as deep as Lubner’s dreams for his native homeland, this wonderful grandchild stands for everything Lubner believes in, hopes for, works for, cares for, loves, and aspires for his beloved country and people.

It is not so much the magnitude of Lubner’s astounding success both in business and philanthropy that inspires others’ esteem, but rather because he is so reluctant to praise himself. He speaks glowingly of his siblings and proudly of his four children, who he says have made an impact in their business lives as well as heartwarming contributions to society. He is generous in expressing deep love for his six grandchildren, respect for the people he works with, and his *raison d’être*, his loving wife Hilary. His humility is charming and inspiring, and revealing of a man who despite his accomplishments towards humanity feels his work is never done.

Bertie Lubner was chairman of Plate Glass & Shatterprufe Industries, an international group involved in the glass and wood industry with its main office in South Africa, located for many years on the site of his father and grandfather’s then humble home. The company was listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange in 1947 and was delisted in 1990, following a major restructuring.



Photo courtesy of Bertie Lubner

BERTIE LUBNER

fixing the world

It's history began in 1897 as a small glass merchants company in Cape Town, South Africa, specializing in mirrored and decorative glass for cabinet makers. In 1921, Lubner's late father, Morrie, joined the company as a manager and things began to take a new direction. He introduced a wider range of products to service the furniture industry and as the years went by, the company had the two main streams of business activity. In 1936, PG began a division to specialize in the manufacture of safety glass to service the first investment by Ford and General Motors in setting up an assembly plant in South Africa.

This safety glass producing company has now had a shatterproof reputation within a group which has celebrated its 100th anniversary. After 1945, each part of the company diversified into a wider range of products in its respective product categories. Eventually, Lubner senior became chairman and over time,

and clean up the hardware store. It taught us to appreciate that while our parents gave us the key fundamentals in life, we had to earn what we needed over and above that."

Lubner, with a big smile, recalls that when he and his brother first began working with their father people would often ask what the boys actually did in the business? His father would often surprise the questioners and reply,



Photo courtesy of Bertie Lubner

a loser," Lubner explains. And for Lubner, as it was for his father, it is not how many votes you can count, but rather that every person counts. "[A vote] means you have someone on the board whose opinion you've eradicated." That has never been an option for the Lubners. With an eloquent South African accent, the savvy businessman says that he'd rather delay a decision until there is absolute compatibility among the board members than to destroy the fabric of a relationship.

Over the years, the Lubner brothers helped build their business interests in South Africa and internationally into a structure that today spans 28 countries, has over 4,000 branches, and 16,000 employees. Through a restructuring which took place in the early part of the 1990s, they disposed of their wood interests to the company management of that division and concentrated on the glass interests, with particular emphasis internationally on the auto glass replace-

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their partners, the Brodie family, whom Lubner calls "wonderful," sold their interests to the Lubner Consortium.



Bertie Lubner and his brother Ronnie joined their father's business as young men. Having started with nothing in life, their father had worked very hard to achieve the success and reputation he did. And it was this strong work ethic that he taught to his children as well. "He would not give us pocket money unless we earned it," Lubner recalls. "We would have to come in on Saturday morning and work and work

"They are my advisors." Then he'd jokingly go on to say, "Whenever I need their bloody advice, I'll ask for it."

Lubner's father was adored not only by his family but by all of his employees, who would always say we work for Morrie Lubner or the Lubners, as opposed to saying they worked for PG. He had that personal touch that made everyone count. And although the company went public in 1947, Bertie Lubner says that till today they have never had a vote at any board meeting, such is their company ethic. "If you vote, that means there is disagreement; a vote means that there is a winner and

ment industry. They generate over \$2 billion in revenue a year.

Even with the bottom line on his side, here, too, Lubner is reluctant to be praised and gives credit to his brother as being by far the better contributor. Lubner shared the joint chief executive-ship with his brother and then stepped down from active involvement after 43 years, but remained with his brother a major shareholder in their glass activities.

Although today in his 70s, Lubner still turns to his deceased father's words of wisdom for advice. His love and respect for his father was immense. He

refers to his father as a larger than life figure. Thus, many a time when Lubner is not certain what to do, he turns to the huge portrait of his father hanging in his office and questions what his father would do in similar circumstances. "He used to say there are issues that are right and issues that are wrong, and your insides tell you," Lubner says quoting his dad. "But the more you try to justify things, doesn't make them right. Trust not only your brain but your guts and instincts."

That advice became very relevant in a recent incident where people had come to him with a very interesting and professional business proposal. On paper it looked great, but something inside of Lubner didn't feel right. He turned to his dad's portrait and said, "I'm over 70, I can make up my own bloody mind." His secretary came in and asked, "What did you say? You can't make up your mind?" She was right. Lubner could not. But he decided to go with his gut as his father had taught him and walked away from the deal. Several months later that same business plan was exposed to be a failure.

While teaching Lubner and his three siblings what was wrong, his parents also taught them, in a very strong way, what was right. It is from that source which Lubner inherits his indomitable character to fix the world and engage in life-changing philanthropy.

As a child, Lubner remembers his own parents with open arms and open wallets and heavily engaged in doing good, both locally and extending to the State of Israel. Perhaps in philanthropy more than anything else, Lubner echoes his father's teaching that when

you do something, regardless of what it is, be committed, be focused, and do your very best. If that is the impetus for his endless drive, no one knows for certain. "If anybody knew where his energy came from they would bottle it," says Hilary, his no nonsense wife of 51 years. "He has drive and compassion beyond his size."

His heart for his other homeland, Israel, was also impassioned by his parent's commitment to the Jewish

over the chairmanship from his father and today Lubner's oldest son, Marc, is at the helm.

In addition to supporting several other causes in Israel, Lubner became vice chairman of Ben-Gurion University at the behest of Joseph Tekoa, Israel's former ambassador to Russia and the UN. His noble efforts earned him an honorary doctorate from the university. Lubner deems the other five people who also received awards that same

night as "unbelievable people who have played a prominent role in Israel" and was greatly honored to be among them.

But it is not the awards or the medals that move Lubner, rather the people whose lives he saves and makes better. That he learned from his mother. He recalls his mother, one of the founders of a home for orphans absorbing primarily victims of the Holocaust. She was also a

major initiator of the creation of a home for the mentally retarded. She could not just sit around committee tables and be a committee *yenta*. She would personally go to the homes and into the kitchens and make sure the food was perfect, often supervising the cooking herself. The kids were what counted. The children adored the gold-hearted woman and called her Auntie Bella or simply Ma. "I learned from my mother that you can't only run people's lives by committees and bureaucracy," Lubner says. "You have to touch their lives by knowing what their needs are, not satisfying your own."

Today, Lubner has become engaged in servicing the desperate needs of the disadvantaged black community of South Africa. Millions of them, particularly children, are still living under the



Photo courtesy of Bertie Lubner

Bertie and Hilary Lubner.

state as well as his own witnessing of the birth of Israel. It was Lubner's parents who became committed to the Beit Hachayal movement in Israel, where facilities and hotels were either acquired or created in different parts of the country for the use of soldiers who were able to take only short leave and not travel home. The first of these was set up in Eilat, where the Lubners bought a hotel and transformed it for the soldiers' use. These "homes" allowed soldiers to relax and be relieved from the trauma they often experience on duty. The Lubner's were noted by none other than Israel's third prime minister, Levi Eshkol, who asked leading Jews from several parts of the world to assist the State of Israel to achieve economic viability by investment, two-way trade, etc. The Lubner's consequently set up the first South Africa-Israel chamber of commerce. Lubner took

ravages of apartheid, even one decade after its demise. Many are orphaned, homeless, or living in tattered shanties, stricken with disease, AIDS, hunger, malnutrition, and despair. He believes no human being can ignore the plight of those who have been denied a skill or an education and have to live as second- and third-class citizens. "Something had to be done," he says emphatically.

Although always active in charitable causes, it was the weight of one medal that Lubner happily and reluctantly accepted that swung him into a more active philanthropic gear. Lubner was awarded by then president F.W. De Klerk with the Order of Meritorious Service, which is tantamount to a knighthood and one of the country's highest awards. He received it for having, along with his brother Ronnie, developed their business internationally and also for his vast community service in South Africa. But as Lubner put down his head during the ceremony when the

brother Ronnie continues to lead the company with distinction. Lubner himself, nonetheless, continues to represent the company within major business organizations as well as with the government on a number of initiatives.

But Bertie Lubner has indeed re-evaluated his priorities. He began devoting far more time to his wife, who he says provided him much support and love over the years, and to his chil-



Nelson Mandela with Bertie Lubner.

Photo courtesy of Bertie Lubner

dren.

Lubner explains how even after South Africa became independent, the situation within the black community was disastrous. Previously, during apartheid, the white population was six million people and the black 38 million. Very little of the tax money went toward helping the blacks. As a result, they do not have the skills or the means to help themselves. "Unless we did something about correcting the situation, independence without a lifestyle for people is meaningless." Lubner's philosophy on philanthropy is that there are two categories. One is defined as charity, which relates to helping those who cannot help themselves. The other is social investment, which relates to helping those who can help themselves, but need the necessary assistance.

He and the rabbi thus set out to form a model organization by the name of MaAfrika Tikkun, which would hopefully lead the way to transform South Africa and help its people claim

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ribbon and medal were placed around his neck and the ordination citation was read out to the audience, his inner voice kept saying, "You, Bertie Lubner, are an absolute fraud."

Although he was indeed deserving of recognition, he felt that he had been spreading himself too thin and was not giving enough of himself to many of the things that he had come care about at that stage of his life.

So, after 43 years, together with his brother, heading their family company, Lubner stepped down as chairman and joint chief executive. His

dren who were growing up so quickly. He felt it was time to give them the necessary attention and support in their endeavors. He also reached out in a much more emphatic way to his extended family - humanity.

Thus, in collaboration with the late Rabbi Cyril Harris, who came from England at great personal sacrifice, Bertie Lubner established MaAfrika Tikkun. It was founded as a Jewish community outreach program to alleviate the many hardships experienced by sections of the disadvantaged South African communities, particularly chil-

lives of promise and dignity. They set up various programs, such as care for orphans and vulnerable children, to administer help and comfort for those with HIV/AIDs, youth leadership programs, feeding schemes, vegetable gardens, and hot nutritious meals for 6,000 kids daily.

The staunch businessman that he is, Lubner has developed his own ten commandments as the guiding principles for Tikkun that ensure it operates in an efficient, practical, business-like manner with proper governance, a dynamic board, representing the

demography of the country, and with defined strategies for an ongoing and increasingly effective future. Tikkun constantly scrutinizes its performance and additionally invites objective outside evaluation. As a result, it has been awarded and recognized as being one of the best NGOs in the country. It is also among only four organizations allowed to carry Nelson Mandela's name as a Patron-in-Chief. But Lubner sees not only what MaAfrika Tikkun has accomplished, but also what it can achieve. As a donor-based organization, his biggest battle in South Africa is donor fatigue. As a result, fundraising offices have been opened in London, New York, and Sydney. Most of them have Lubner's children or nephews directly involved, as this is considered to be "a family business."

It's an ironic tragedy that some tire from giving money while others tire from the pain of suffering, hunger, disease, and helplessness. But Lubner, his brother, and his team show no signs of being fatigued from doing good. In addition to serving the most practical and fundamental of South Africa's needs, they also wanted to give the nation a gift when their company celebrated its 100th anniversary. The project had to be with children coming from the most disadvantaged areas, and it had to be new and different with opportunities for growth, and ultimately with nationwide coverage. What resulted was the formation of an organization called The Field Band Foundation, fashioned on the American model of marching bands. Kids in the poorest of towns who knew only crime, gang warfare, and drudgery were recruited and trained to join bands. They were plucked from the squalor of their lives and introduced to the discipline and responsibilities of being a team member. This gave them the security and dignity of feeling that they are a recognized human being. An

agreement was entered into with the Norwegian government who sent in top people to assist in the training. Today over 4,000 kids make up 23 bands around the country. Lubner projects that by 2010, 10,000 kids will participate. The program not only teaches the participants how to blow a bugle or beat a drum or dance to the beat and rhythm of the band, they are taught about the danger of AIDS, issues relating to responsibility—to them-



Photo courtesy of Bertie Lubner

Bertie and Ronnie Lubner.

selfs, to parents, and to their communities. Lubner explains. "We teach them the imperative of looking after their loved ones and the lives of others."

Lubner explains how these basics must be taught, as the value of family and family structure broke down during the apartheid years. The band program is partly based on a reward system and the band members have to earn their way up the "parade route." As their competence improves, they compete against other bands, culminating in the annual national championships, which is one of the most awe inspiring and emotional events to witness, Lubner says.

Being the avid sports lover that he is, Lubner found other means of encouraging pride and nationalism among his fellow citizens. From his previous involvement with the Olympic movement, he was recently appointed

as a governor of a newly-established body which encompasses all sport in South Africa. All of this now falls under a National Body called the South African Sports Commission and Olympic Council (SASCOC). He is of the strong belief that the greatest binding element in a country is achieved through sport, as every citizen is proud of his country, and there is no better method to heal and unite a country once bitterly divided. SASCOC recently received a major sponsorship from a Swiss charity to help set up state-of-the-art sports facilities, schools, leading coaches, encompassing a coordinated and defined program to develop South Africa as a leading competitor in world sport. This program is designed to help kids realize the rewards of hard work and excellence. And excellence is always something Lubner strives for.

As for who's to bless and who's to blame for how Lubner turned out, that is now the subject of a book he is writing. But even here Lubner doesn't focus on himself. Rather, he writes about the amazing and inspiring people he has met throughout his life and those who have had the biggest influence on him, as well as recording significant events that became part of the history of the world.

"If you think you have all the answers, then you're fooling yourself," Lubner says. "Of course, you can't imitate others, but you can take from the lessons they teach." Among the many notables who have inspired Lubner, he says the two men who had the biggest impact on him were his father and Nelson Mandela.

As the interview comes to an end, I question, internally, as Bertie Lubner gives credit to everyone else but himself, if this very humble man realizes how many people look to him as their icon, their leader, their savior, and the greatest inspiration in their lives. lifestyles