



Photo courtesy of Gail Asper

Gail Asper the gift of giving

by Aliza Davidovitz

It is hard to believe that the sub-zero temperatures of Winnipeg, Canada could nurture and produce someone as warm, lovely and vivacious as Gail Asper. The middle child and only daughter of Babs and Izzy Asper is the complete opposite of what anyone might expect her to be. She is devoid of all pretense or snobbery and seems oblivious to the fact that she is the daughter of Canada's most influential media mogul, Israel Asper, executive chairman of CanWest Global Communications Corporation. She's described by a CanWest Vice president, Geoffrey Elliot, as being as effervescent as champagne. And indeed, Gail is bubbly, delightful to the senses, and leaves you wanting more. Her enthusiastic personality is infectious and once you've met Gail Asper, you just can't quite get her out of your system.

And if Gail Asper exudes energy and confidence, it is not because of her famous family, but rather she radiates with her own personal accomplishments, achievements and independence. She has tested her own worth and has prevailed.

At the University of Manitoba, where she majored in French Literature and minored in political science, she was on the Dean's List for all three years of her attendance. She later studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and then attended the Banff School of Fine Arts where she studied drama, her hobby and first love. In 1984 she obtained her law degree from the University of Manitoba, her father's alma mater, where she again made it onto the Dean's Honor List in her third year. She worked her way up from legal aid assistant at the University Legal Aid Office in 1982, to an associate lawyer in the prestigious corporate and commercial Halifax law firm, Goldberg & Thompson, and then joined CanWest Global Communications as General Counsel.

"It's extremely important that I had my own career, self-achievement and self-sufficiency," Gail says. "People treat you differently when you do." Gail admits that she was glad to be in Halifax and pursuing her own thing where the name Asper was not as well known. "Whatever I accomplished there, I did on my own," she says.

Gail also advises women in general not to be too reliant on anyone else's income. "It's not even a matter of a man leaving you. What if he gets sick and dies and leaves you with nothing?" Gail questions, referring to an incident that happened to someone she knew in Winnipeg.

Gail shares how her boss in Halifax—who was very smart, but also extremely critical—helped hone her skills. "It taught me how to build myself up," Gail admits. "I used to have to talk to myself at lunch time

and tell myself, 'This is not so terrible. I can learn from this. I do make mistakes, but I don't make them twice.'"

Although she hates to be criticized, Asper does admit that it's probably the best way to learn. She admits to *Lifestyles* that although her own father can sometimes be critical, he is usually always right. "Once you accept that someone else is right, then you can learn," she concedes.



Gail Asper, Michael Paterson, Jonathan and Stephen.

"The older you get, the more you realize that it's not that older people are necessarily smarter," she adds, "it's just that they have more experience."

Asper says that she adopted that mature mind-set from Anne in *Anne of Green Gables*, a fictional character she played in a high school production. Anne was a character that persevered, who failed, made mistakes and then tried again, until she grew to trust her own worth.

Asper says that she also learned a lot from watching her father's persistence in the face of many obstacles. "Having watched my father persevere and succeed, leads me to believe that persistence is the key ingredient to success." She refers to her favorite quote by Calvin Coolidge, to emphasize the power of persistence: "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education

alone will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent."

Gail Asper grew up in a very demanding home. "When we got a B+, our parents used to ask why we didn't get an A." It was Gail's parents who pushed her to go into law. Very unlike his own father, Israel Asper believed that there was no better education for his kids than a law degree, even if they never practiced a day of law. But Gail's heart had always been into singing and in the theater.

Throughout the years, she has performed in productions such as *Twelve Angry Men*, *Guys and Dolls*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Funny Girl* and *The Trial of Anatoly Scharansky*, among others. Some were produced by the Manitoba Bar Association as a fundraiser for the Manitoba Theater Center. She even began applying to fine arts and drama schools across Canada. "Then I decided that even a mediocre lawyer usually enjoys a better living than the finest artist," Gail remembers rationalizing. "So I went to law school instead."

By 1989, Asper, having proved herself as an attorney, decided to come back to work as General Counsel at CanWest, a company that her father had put his heart and soul into creating. In that position, which she held for 10 years, she was responsible for all legal issues and the hiring of company lawyers. Today Gail is corporate secretary and director of CanWest Global and corporate secretary and managing director of the Asper Foundation. She is also president and trustee of the CanWest Global Foundation. In these roles, she is more involved with the board of directors and shareholder relations, corporate ethics and community relations. She represents

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the family’s charitable policies, working closely with her father and brother Leonard to set budgets. As corporate secretary she says she is the soul of the corporate governance area.

It is clear that while Israel Asper was busy giving his kids everything he didn’t have, he didn’t forget to give them what he did have, his love for the Jewish people and his charitable spirit, the gift of giving. Gail tells how her parents insisted that all their children make charitable donations from an early age. Her first donation was to CARE when she was just five years old, and she still gets mailings from them until this day.

Gail, age 42, married to Michael Paterson, a federal government water research scientist, and mother of two young boys, tells *Lifestyles* that the most rewarding work she does involves the Asper Foundation.

“I’m a person who would support every worthy cause,” Asper says. “I can’t say no. I’d rather give each person \$100 instead of one person a million dollars.”

She does point out that her father holds the opposing view. The Asper Foundation’s strategic philosophy, she says, is to first decide what causes are most important to them and then to create institutions and programming that will help people and make a difference.

Asper says that the greatest lesson she learned at home was the responsibility of *tikkun olam*, fixing the world. Part of the reason she and her father were motivated to go to law school was to help other people.

“Those things permeated our family,” Gail informs *Lifestyles*. “There was also a profound love of learning and knowledge,

knowing about Judaism, knowing what’s going on in Israel, and knowing our history. He worked very hard on that.”

Today, all the Asper children are staunch supporters of the Jewish State. Gail herself is a member of the board of governors of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She also confides how her heart skips a beat every time she hears about a suicide attack. She is very concerned for her family members who live near Hadera and for all Israelis.

Gail, whose Hebrew name, Gila, appropriately means happiness, was raised in a Zionist home, but it was not an observant home. “We were in synagogue only on the High Holy Days,” she says. “But attendance on the High Holy Days was not negotiable in our house.”

However, one of Gail’s most special Yom Kippur memories is of her paternal grandmother, Celia, crying. “She was such a devout, pious woman, the daughter of a *kohain* and a rabbi,” Gail reminisces. “She would weep every Kol Nidre.” Gail, too, finds herself teary-eyed every Yom Kippur when the story of “The Ten Martyrs” is recounted.

But the remainder of the year Gail finds herself quite happy and enjoying the life-altering work that she is committed to. When she is not carrying out the work of The Asper Foundation and the CanWest Global Foundation, she enjoys community work. She is campaign chair and a member of the board of directors of United Way of Winnipeg; she is co-chair of the Manitoba Theater \$10 Million Endowment Campaign and of Partners in the Park. She also sits on the board of too many causes to mention. These positions give her the ability to involve herself in the community and the arts and to meet new people all the time, something she loves to do.

“I was always drawn toward the arts and when I was asked to volunteer for the Manitoba Theatre Centre and other groups, even though I couldn’t be an artist, it gave me a chance to make things easier for artists.”

She says that she and her family have always had an enormous respect for people who live hand-to-mouth just to pursue the arts. As a result, the CanWest Global Foundation also heavily sponsors the arts and cutting-edge Canadian artists. At the same time, chairing the United Way Campaign was important to Gail because of the need to remember and help those less fortunate. “I love fundraising and convincing people that these things are important,” Asper confesses. “It takes a lot of chutzpah to barge into someone’s office and ask for money.”

Asper is so busy with work, family and her charitable causes that on her one page biography she lists her hobbies as singing, theater, travel and downhill skiing and then adds “but unfortunately, never gets to do any of them.”

She describes herself as fast-motivated and passionate about whatever she takes on, including finding the Krispy Kream donut she desperately craved the morning of her interview with *Lifestyles*. Her enthusiasm for all things is so infectious, that after the interview this writer searched the streets of Manhattan looking for a Krispy Kream to see what the heck I was missing.

Is Gail Asper happy?

She answers that question referring to the play *Proof* by David Auburn. In the play, the main character asks her father if he is happy. He answers by saying, “I’m busy.” She tells her father that that is not the same thing. His answer to her is, “I’m not so sure that it’s not.” [Lifestyles]