

Jack Chisvin planted seeds that will continue growing

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Jack and Phyllis Chisvin

In 2013, Sabrina Malach came across the Jack Chisvin Garden, a small plot with a few trees outside the Wolfond Centre for Jewish Campus Life at the University of Toronto.

Malach is the director of engagement at Shores, a grassroots Jewish environmental organization that was based at the Wolfond Centre at the time. She contacted Chisvin to get his permission to turn his eponymous garden into a community garden.

He not only approved of the project, he wanted to be involved in it. Chisvin and his wife, Phyllis, became important mentors to the Shores staff and other groups that got involved.

Chisvin, a Jewish community leader and a former *CJN* columnist, died at the end of July at the age of 92. Phyllis Chisvin died three weeks later.

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Malach recalled her first conversation with Chisvin. “We quickly became friends. We bonded over tomatoes. Jack was a serious tomato grower,” she said.

Chisvin went on to give seminars for Shoresh on tomato growing. Later, he allocated the raised garden beds in his own backyard to the Pearl Project, a joint cultivation venture between Shoresh and Jewish Family & Child (JF&CS).

Some former JF&CS foster children are involved in the project. They grow and dry herbs like mint, chamomile and lemon balm, which they turn into herbal teas.

Malach recounted how Chisvin shared his gardening knowledge with the youth and mentored them. They dried the herbs at his home, until he sold it two years ago.

“It was a beautiful program. Jack and Phyllis really supported these young adults. Their backyard became a community garden,” said Malach.

In 2017, the Chisvins rented a tent and hosted a large fundraiser for Shoresh in their backyard.

Their daughter, Karen Chisvin, was not surprised by her father’s involvement with Shoresh. She said he was an avid gardener and he had a long history of leadership and fundraising in the Jewish community. He was president of UJA Federation of Greater Toronto from 1991 to 1993 and spent many years on the board of Technion Canada.

He and his wife – who was active in B’nai Brith, the National Council of Jewish Women and the Jewish community book fair – were founding members of Beth David Congregation. They were also active in the initial building and the expansion of the shul.

The Toronto Heschel School also benefited from Chisvin’s gardening wisdom. He worked with the school’s co-founder, Ellen Kessler, and a volunteer crew to build the first raised garden beds for its environment program and continued to support it over the years.

An electrical engineer by training, Chisvin volunteered to be the project manager for the construction of the Wolfond Centre, which houses Jewish campus organizations. To honour him for this volunteerism, the community named the Wolfond Centre garden after him.

“Over the years, the garden has evolved into an incredible oasis. There are dozens of native flowering plants and bees and butterflies. We have tomatoes from Jack’s seeds,” Malach said.

In 2015, Chisvin ran a workshop on how to grow tomatoes like a pro for 15 people. “Phyllis was there, too. Jack was in the garden teaching us,” said Malach. “He became an educator, as well as a donor.”

He was a very conscientious teacher, she said. "He was very strict about the method. It resulted in beautiful plants."

Earlier this year, Karen Chisvin brought Malach tomato seeds that the family had saved from the Chisvins' garden.

Malach said she brought the seeds to the TanenbaumCHAT day school, where Shoresch runs a greenhouse program. The students planted the seeds and grew tomato seedlings.

"We distributed the seedlings from CHAT to all of our sites. Those seedlings are now tomatoes," she said.

Malach said the Chisvins "started to feel like family" to her and others at Shoresch. "We visited them in their new condo. Later, we visited Jack on the palliative-care ward.

"He was a very generous person and a unique giant in the community."