



Photo courtesy of Ruth Asper

# Ruth "Babs" Asper

## the voice of reason

by Aliza Davidovitz

**T**hey say that behind every great man there is a great woman. Indeed, behind Israel Asper, chairman of CanWest Global Communications Corp., there is a great woman. But what makes his wife Babs greater than most women is that she refuses to take any credit for her husband's accomplishments. She is the kind of person who would never say, "If it wasn't for me...." In fact, she says that her husband is his own man and that frankly he would have achieved success even without her.

But if Babs Asper is modest about expressing her role in the Asper family and her husband's achievements, her children are not short of praise for her. "Our mother is the glue that holds this family together," says Gail Asper. "My father is very eclectic and kept us all on our toes, but my mother was firmly grounded and was the voice of sanity." All the siblings express exactly the same sentiment. Babs was always the anchor of the family, while their very ambitious father was sailing the stormy seas to success.

Leonard Asper relates how his father used to always jokingly say that their mother gets them for the first 18 years of their lives and that he would get them for the next 18 years. So in those early formative years, it was important for Babs to teach her children the value of things in life. Leonard remembers going grocery shopping with his mother as a young boy and how she would always crosscheck the prices between brands in a concerted effort to teach him the value of money. "In our house nothing came for free," Leonard recalls. "Our parents didn't give us money just because they had it. There was no reward unless you earned it." He says that he is delighted that he was raised that way because today he appreciates everything that he has and possesses the confidence that goes along with earning what he has attained. He also remembers how his mother wouldn't let him out of the house to play hockey until he practiced his piano. "I am eternally grateful to her for that too," he adds.

**M**aking *menschen* out of her children was always paramount for Ruth Asper, nicknamed Babs. Her son David recalls that as young boy, by the time he had received his driver's license, he had already accumulated several traffic violations for driving a dirt bike before he was of legal age. When the judge wanted to let him off the hook for those violations because all-in-all he was good kid, David tells how his mother stood up and started telling off the judge for even considering such leniency. "As far as my Mom was concerned, I deserved capital punishment," David jokingly tells *Lifestyles*. Mrs. Asper says that her kids have been very fortunate in life and that she was determined to instill in them a sense of responsibility.

Babs and Izzy Asper were married in 1956. It was Babs who supported them while her young groom was still in law school. She worked in her father's manufacturing plant as the office manager until her first son, David, was born. While raising her family, Babs became very actively involved in the community and volunteered much of her time to worthwhile causes, such as the Jewish Federation, Jewish education, hospital boards and the Winnipeg Jewish Community Council.

Giving back to the community and society is a very important value in the Asper household. "We have been very blessed in our lives and you always have to remember that and help others wherever you can," Mrs. Asper says. "It's been a generational thing that we've learned from our parents and passed on to our children."

Although Babs Asper gave up managing her father's office, she never stopped being a manager. David Asper calls her the manager of the Asper family. "My father had his dreams and wild aspirations and she knew she was going to be a part of that," David says. "In many ways she made it possible for him. My father was using our house as a welcoming point for his many careers. Our house was always filled with very interesting people. My mother was the one managing everything."

David goes on to say that his mother really underestimates the role she played when she married Izzy Asper and bought into his vision. Babs does say that she knew that her husband would be successful in something very big and important, although she never anticipated the financial success they have achieved. "I always

knew he was not going to be a small man," Mrs. Asper tells. "He always dreamed big dreams. We've come a long way together."

Leonard Asper says that his mother has also always been a very good "BS" detector. Although he says his dad never got snookered by anyone, his mother had especially good antennae to know who was genuine and who was less than trustworthy. She always knew who to keep at arm's length to protect her husband and her family.

**B**abs and Israel Asper first met at a friend's party when they were teenagers. Babs remembers going home that night, aged 14, and writing in her diary: "I met a new boy. His name is Izzy Asper. Oh, dear Diary, why aren't there any interesting boys around here?" But a few years later the couple was destined to meet again at the Hillel student organization on campus at the University of Manitoba where the Aspers forged their long-lasting partnership of 46 years.

"I was short, and she was the only person of the opposite sex who was shorter," Izzy Asper jokes. He continues to jest by saying that what solidified their relationship was that Babs was the only girl he knew who had a long-playing record player, as well as a record of Dave Brubeck, one of the most well-known jazz pianists of all time. Izzy Asper says that they actually rushed into marriage so that they could go away together to see a Brubeck concert in San Francisco. On a more sedate note, he says that Babs was the only woman who shared the same interests as him. Babs says that they had mutual friends who were always trying to get her and Izzy to go out. Then one year when Izzy was directing the school variety show in which Babs was also involved, the two started to get very close. "He had such endearing qualities," Babs tells. "He was fun and interesting."

Babs says that the couple was also drawn together because of their interests in Jewish causes. Because of her strong Zionist upbringing, Babs finds the ignorance of young Jews today painful and disastrous. "I lived through the period leading to the establishment of the State of Israel and it was not something that we took for granted," she says. "Today's kids take it for granted and don't realize how fragile the whole situation is."

She feels that the whole Jewish educational system is remiss in properly educating

youngsters to make a strong case for the Jewish State. But if the school system has failed Jewish kids, Babs and Israel Asper have not failed their own kids or grandchildren. The Aspers have emphasized the importance of the Jewish homeland and Jewish history and are making sure their children and grandchildren have the education and knowledge to defend their birthright and claim to the State of Israel. The Asper Foundation has also taken on the responsibility of educating the new generation of Jews by setting up programming and trips that both instill requisite information and generate positive feelings toward their Jewish heritage.

**W**hen speaking with Babs Asper one cannot help but feel a sense of warmth, protectiveness and encouragement, as if she is your very own mother. It seems hard to believe that a woman of her social stature is so down to earth, friendly and concerned about others. She says that her self-confidence is the result of a very warm, encouraging home where love was unequivocal; a home where she was taught to be independent and strong. Until this very day she has no compunctions about going to a movie or a play by herself. Even as a young girl, she says that if she didn't have a date she would gladly go out with her parents. It was quite amusing to find out that this elegant billionaire was even taught by her father how to change her own tire.

This no-nonsense, but very sweet grandmother of eight had to stop and think before answering whether she or her husband have changed over the years. Then she jokingly replies, "It's been 46 years. I had to remember what we were like then." But the answer is ultimately no. "We have not changed," she says. "How can you forget where you came from?"

If Babs Asper is reluctant to come forward and claim she is the strong woman behind the scenes, that humility serves even more as a testament to her strength. With her partnership, her husband emerged as a young man from the rural fields of Winnipeg to the summit of corporate and human success. Her three grown children, David, Gail and Leonard, are accomplished attorneys in their own right; they are stalwart Zionists, great philanthropists and unquestionable *menschen*. Mrs. Asper does not need to say a word—the products of her labor speak for themselves.

*[Photo: Bob]*