

In Service to Others

WRITTEN BY
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PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF
Mark Gurvis

Since his youth, Mark Gurvis has made community outreach and philanthropy his life's work.

As the CEO of the Ronald S. Roadburg Foundation, a Vancouver, British Columbia-based private charity with a focus on Jewish community outreach in Canada, Israel, and beyond, Mark Gurvis has reached the pinnacle of his profession. Whether in his current role or past positions, such as the CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver or the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland, or as executive director of Jewish Federations of North America, 64-year-old Gurvis has enjoyed a decades-long career devoted to Jewish communal service and philanthropy. It's a path he could have never envisioned for himself as a 12-year-old paperboy in his native Long Island.

And based on the breadth and

scope of his current, impactful responsibilities, he's far from finished—not by a long shot.

Gurvis' professional journey began in his youth. He served as president of the Long Island Federation of Temple Youth, the regional chapter of NFTY the Reform Jewish youth movement, during his senior year in high school. Later, at SUNY Albany where he attended college, Gurvis held several leadership roles with the school's Hillel chapter. (Hillel is a Jewish campus organization that works with many colleges and universities across the globe.) For Gurvis, who also holds a master's degree in Jewish communal service from Hebrew Union College and an MSW from University of Southern California, the die was cast.

"I knew I wanted to work in the community and that came out of my involvement with Jewish youth activities," he says. "I found the whole experience very embracing and fulfilling. When I realized through my work with Hillel at SUNY Albany that there was a professional career path, that's when I came to the

decision this is what I wanted to do.”

After graduation, he landed a job at Hillel at the University of Michigan and never looked back. Since then, he has been on an upward trajectory, with his current position the culmination of years of toil, dedication and experience.

However, it hasn't been all smooth sailing. The Israel-Hamas war that continues to rage on at press time has posed an enormous challenge for the foundation's work in Israel.

“The war has impacted our work very tremendously,” admits Gurvis. “A significant portion of our grantmaking is in Israel. All of that work is disrupted. One particular focus is Northern Galilee along the Lebanese border, much of which is now evacuated and facing enormous uncertainty.”

As resilience in the face of adversity is a hallmark trait of the Jewish psyche, Gurvis is forging ahead.

“My Israeli colleague and I talk every day about what is happening,” says Gurvis. “We're focused on what will be done after the active phase of the war is over.”

The foundation's work in Israel is only a fraction of the organization's philanthropic efforts. Formed in 2021 through the estate of the late Vancouver businessman Ronald S. Roadburg, the foundation is focused on supporting the local Jewish community as well as the broader community at large. Also factoring into the equation are initiatives that develop solutions to complex societal issues, including climate action and addictions.

Right now, a sizable portion of the foundation's attention is devoted to supporting the more-than \$600 million JWest project





— Gurvis with his wife, Leah Pomerantz, and daughters Lottie, Annie, and Noa

in Vancouver. It's the blueprint of a 3.3-acre complex set to house a state-of-the-art community center, a new high school building, expanded space for the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, and ultimately two residential building offering a mix of market and subsidized housing.

A partnership between three local mainstays—the Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver, the Jewish Community Centre, and King David High School—JWest also has backing from the federal Canadian government and the provincial government in British Columbia, each of which are providing \$25 million. Also contributing to the JWest coffers has been the Diamond Foundation, which provided a \$25 million as a challenge to the community which has already been met.

The Ronald S. Roadburg Foundation got involved in this massive philanthropic undertaking in January 2023 when it teamed up with the Al Roadburg Foundation, a private char-

ity organization founded by Ronald's father, to make a \$36 million capital campaign matching challenge to JWest. The gift marked the single largest donation given to the JWest project so far.

"JWest represents an opportunity for the Vancouver Jewish community to create the essential infrastructure it needs for the next generation of Jewish life in this region," explains Gurvis. "The Jewish community in Vancouver many years ago was highly concentrated. It's much more spread out today. But the campus is still the geographic center of the community."

A central aim of the JWest project is to build a new Jewish Community Centre, as the current one is housed in an aging structure.

"The project was initiated when our foundation was just getting started," recalls Gurvis. "It is a big plan, and has engendered a lot of anxiety about whether community could pull it off. It's a very bold vision on how to leverage that land."

According to Gurvis, the JWest project is currently moving from the planning phase to implementation with the start of construction likely a year away. So far, the total philanthropic amount raised by JWest has been \$108.6 million toward the \$161 million philanthropic target, with the additional



\$50 million in government funding also committed. The housing component envisioned in the second phase will be financed differently.

Gurvis became the CEO of the Ronald S. Roadburg Foundation in February 2022. Drawing upon his prior work with Jewish organizations, Gurvis brings a seasoned and savvy touch to his present job.

“I came to this role with a wide net of relationships that have been very helpful which enable us to assemble information and focus on strategy quickly,” he says. “We never think about just the philanthropic investments we make. We also think how we can leverage our relationships to advance what we want to achieve. In every particular issue we look at there’s a whole universe with many moving parts. You have to figure out what’s your lane and where you can have a unique impact.”

In his personal life, Gurvis notes that he is most proud of his three daughters, whom he has raised with his wife of 33 years, Leah Pomerantz.

“Our daughters are wonderful human beings but also wonderfully connected with each other and with us and in their own ways with Jewish community,” he says, his voice teeming with unabashed joy. “Even though we moved back to Vancouver and they’re in New York, we’re still a tight family unit.”

Asked if he has a philosophy that informs both his personal and professional life, Gurvis answers with mix of eloquence and honesty.

“I carry with me in my wallet two little slips of paper, each of which has a different Hebrew phrase,” he says. “One translates ‘I am but dust and ashes’ and the other is ‘The world was created for my sake.’ On the one hand, I always try to operate with personal humility and recognize it’s not all about me. On the other hand, I try to recognize I have a unique set of talents to make the world a better place and I have a responsibility to use them and lead. I always work to hold those two concepts in balance and that guides me in my work. The balance of these concepts is my personal philosophy.”

It has set the template for a life that has been immensely gratifying.

“Professionally, I couldn’t have imagined when I was in my last year of university focusing on Jewish community work that I would have ended up having the opportunities that I’ve had to work in Cleveland, Vancouver, at Jewish Federations of North America, and now this foundation,” he says. “I know every one of our board members and staff feel totally privileged to do this work. It’s really a blessing.” **LMI**