

Making a difference after retirement

Bernard Pinsky, volunteer chairman of the Ronald S. Roadburg Foundation, says everyone, regardless of financial position, can make a difference

By ALAN ROSENBAUM JANUARY 24, 2024 22:17



‘I am so pumped every day,’ says Bernard Pinsky with an impish grin. ‘I am really very excited.’

Pinsky, who worked as a corporate and securities lawyer for decades in Vancouver before retiring a year and a half ago, is clearly relishing his retirement.

But what exactly is Pinsky doing in his longed-for retirement? Is he swatting golf balls, playing bridge, or scaling the Canadian Rockies? Far from it. These days, he spends most of his time as volunteer chairman of the Ronald S. Roadburg Foundation, one of the largest Jewish foundations in [Canada](#), which was established in 2021.

The Roadburg Foundation established three main priorities at its inception: strengthening and securing communities – principally the Jewish community, but also other at-risk communities; supporting populations disproportionately affected by circumstance or inequities; and addressing complex social challenges, with an initial focus on addiction and climate change.

Pinsky explains that throughout his life, he has been involved in charitable giving, though to a lesser degree than he is today. “I have been involved in philanthropy for 40 years,” he says. “Giving was important, and I would try to support organizations that I thought were doing a good job.”

While Pinsky found donating as a private individual satisfying, he says that the needs of the organizations he supported were so great that the amount he gave did not make a significant difference. It is for this reason that he is thrilled with his full-time volunteer position with the Roadburg Foundation.

“As the chair of a sizable foundation, we can move the needle,” he says. “I am dedicating my life to making sure that the assets in the foundation are used in a way that will make the world a better place. Part of our foundation’s plan is to help organizations make transformative changes. We put a lot of thought into helping organizations do their work in a better way or serve more people.”



Pinsky explains that the [Roadburg Foundation](#) has the financial ability to help organizations make a greater impact. “When the foundation gives a grant,” he states, “we don’t just provide the money and say, ‘Here, do what you want with it.’ We say, ‘This is what you are doing. We would like to help you do something a little bit different, and we know that doing this will require money, but it would make a bigger impact.’ Or ‘We want to take what you are doing and expand it in orders of magnitude so that you can do a lot more and make a huge impact in the world.’”

“We work it through, we give them advice as to what kind of things we are looking for from them, we give them connections and ideas, and often we connect organizations with other organizations that might give them further abilities. That is a huge added value to these organizations that we help.”

Though Pinsky is involved with a major foundation that disburses vast amounts of money, he emphasizes that everyone can make a difference, regardless of their financial position. “People can do a lot without huge amounts of money behind them,” he explains.

“They can do that by getting involved in the organizations. All of these organizations need volunteers. A huge amount of what organizations need are dedicated people who volunteer for them, and they make a tremendous difference. If you volunteer your time or take a leadership position and learn about the organization, or come to meetings and make suggestions, the difference between a big foundation like ours and a dedicated person can be reduced considerably.

“It is not just writing the check – it is giving of your time, ideas, and energy. Don’t just write the check – get involved.”

Pinsky traces his interest in philanthropy and his success in life to his parents.

His father was a Holocaust survivor, and his mother was born in Winnipeg after her parents arrived in Canada in the 1920s. “My parents were loving,” he recalls. “My mother had her ideas about right and wrong, as did my father, and they demonstrated what they thought was right. They gave me a lot of self-confidence and let me grow up making mistakes. Once you have confidence, you can do what you want to do.”

A fluent Hebrew speaker deeply connected with Israel, Pinsky met his wife, Daniella, when he was 19. She had gone to Winnipeg in 1973 to study English for a year and was living with relatives in the city. They married in 1975 and, in 1978, moved to Israel for one year, where Pinsky worked as an attorney-in-training. They returned to Canada in 1979 and moved to Vancouver, where he began his legal career.

Soon after their return to Canada, Pinsky became known for his pro-Israel activism. “The Israel-Lebanon war began in June 1982,” he recalls. “The newspapers were against Israel, and there was a great deal of Israel-bashing. The community called a meeting, and the old leaders of the Jewish community advised that we not do anything

and not rock the boat. 'It will pass,' they said. I couldn't stand it. I said that the media were presenting misleading reports about Israel and were not giving Israel a fair hearing."

The then-26-year-old Pinsky was approached by the Canadian Jewish Congress to write letters refuting the accusations against Israel in the media. "That was the start of my being a passionate Israel defender and advocate," he says today. "I have continued since then without stopping."

Pinsky has been to Israel more than 40 times. His most recent trip was this past May on behalf of the Roadburg Foundation, where they examined various projects that are underway.

Currently, the foundation has a number of projects in Israel. At the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Israel Center for Addiction and Mental Health is converting old dormitory buildings into an outpatient addiction facility and research and teaching center. The Roadburg Foundation has supported the renovation of one of these buildings.

Heading farther north, Roadburg is paying for the construction of a community center in a new neighborhood of Kiryat Shmona, Israel's northernmost city, called Yuvalim, which is the first new neighborhood being built there in the past 45 years. The foundation is also funding the construction of a computer science building at Tel Hai College, located north of Kiryat Shmona.

The northern city of Safed houses Bar-Ilan University's Azrieli Medical Faculty, Israel's newest medical school, established in 2011, part of a broad national initiative to strengthen Israel's northern region and close gaps in healthcare resources and outcomes between the north and center of the country. While the percentage of graduates staying in the North after completing their studies is slowly increasing, the school is eager to reach 50% retention in communities across northern Israel. The foundation is supporting the new ROM Galil 2.0 program, which will provide its participants with connections to medical facilities in northern communities and financial incentives to help attract and retain a greater percentage of graduates to settle in the North.

"Israel has grown, but the North has not," says Pinsky. "The Vancouver community and the Canadian coast-to-coast cities, which include all of the Jewish Federations in Canada other than Montreal and Toronto, are connected with the Galilee Panhandle area, known in Hebrew as Etzba Hagalil (the 'finger of the Galilee'). We are trying to help them develop it."

How does Bernard Pinsky feel when, as volunteer chairman of the Roadburg Foundation, he helps arrange a major donation or gift to a worthy cause? Pinsky answers with a succinct one-word reply. "Gratitude."

Expanding on his thought, he says, “I am so immensely lucky to be in a position where I can make those kinds of transformational gifts to organizations. It is an incredible story and circumstances that allowed me to be in this position. We all are exposed to negativity about everything all the time. We are able to make a slight difference to make things better, and that is gratifying to go against the grain of what everybody is doing, tearing things down. “It’s easy to tear things down and hard to build things up, so helping people build things that are worthwhile is very gratifying,” he says.

The interview with Bernard Pinsky was conducted prior to the Oct. 7 attacks.

This article was written in cooperation with Canadian Friends of the Hebrew University.