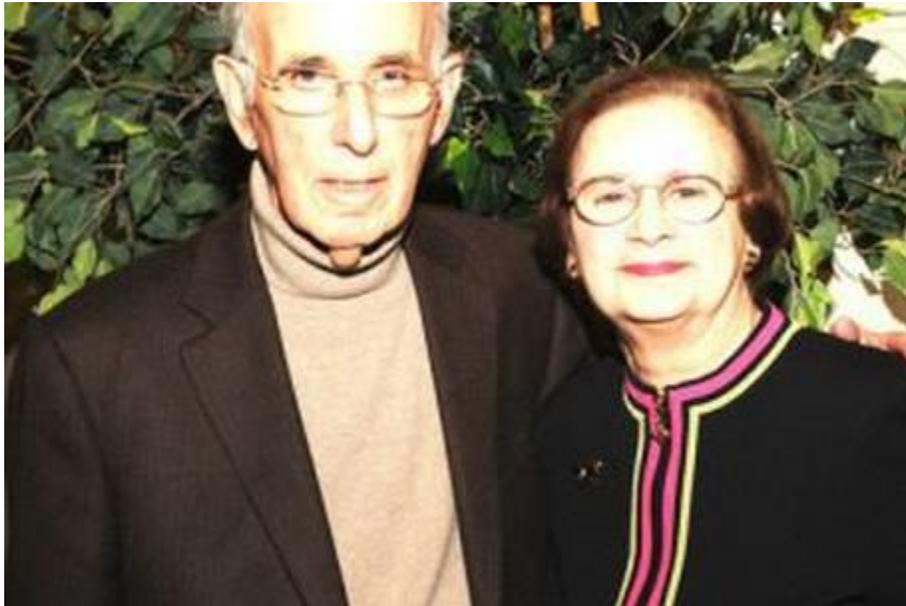


Entrepreneur and humanitarian Irving Schwartz dies at age 81

Chris Shannon

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SYDNEY — One of Cape Breton's most recognizable entrepreneurs and humanitarians, Irving Schwartz, died Saturday morning. He was 81.



Paramedics were called to the Schwartz home early in the morning. He died shortly after arriving at the Cape Breton Regional Hospital. The New Waterford native battled cancer and Parkinson's disease for the past two years.

One phrase that has left an impression on all those who knew him — “I guarantee it!” — came from his Schwartz furniture and appliance store commercials that ran on television in the 1980s and 1990s.

“He was an incredible ambassador to Cape Breton,” said Brian Purchase, who, under Schwartz's succession plan, now owns and operates Schwartz Furniture and Appliance stores.

“He knew everybody. At the furniture shows we'd go to, you couldn't make it very far down the hall with Irving because he would talk with everybody.”

Of all his business holdings, Schwartz prized his furniture business above all. It was started by his parents, Abraham and Rose Schwartz, in 1922.

Purchase said Schwartz was organizing succession plans for all of his operations, but it was the furniture store business his mother built, following his father's death when Schwartz was three years old, that he wanted to see continue operating.

“It was very important to him because his mother was very important to him,” he said.

Rose Schwartz was left to raise six children and ran the family’s general store in New Waterford. Irving took a keen interest in the business. At only 13, Schwartz made his first of many buying trips to Montreal.

Although he spent one semester at Mount Allison University and another at New York University, he often said he was a graduate of the Rose Schwartz School of Business.

An officer of the Order of Canada, Schwartz was also the owner of the Seaside Group of cable television and high-speed Internet.

He also backed Seaside Cable’s participation in making broadband Internet service available everywhere in Nova Scotia.

Seaside is expected to complete its part of the project, covering the nine counties in northern Nova Scotia and Cape Breton by year’s end.

Schwartz also owned biomedical and software companies and headed the Sydney-based Canadian International Demining Corps., a landmine removal organization with operations in several countries, which was the impetus for his 1997 investiture in the Order of Canada, and propelled Schwartz to national prominence. In 2003, he was named an officer of the order.

In many instances he guaranteed his commitment to the success of a cause, said Barbara Stead-Coyle, CEO of the Cape Breton Regional Hospital Foundation.

He joined the Cape Breton Regional Hospital Foundation’s Cape Breton Cares Campaign as chair, but he did so only because of a misunderstanding, Stead-Coyle said.

At a luncheon to announce that the campaign had reached its \$1-million mark, Stead-Coyle asked Schwartz a second time if he would serve as chair — Schwartz rebuffed her first offer when she approached him at his furniture store.

“Will you chair it for me?” she asked Schwartz. “And he said, ‘Absolutely,’ and I nearly fell over backwards. Within five minutes I went around that room ... and before (Schwartz) had left, I had built his cabinet.

“He thought I was asking him to chair the ambassador’s council. He got confused, and his big joke was, ‘Had I known then what she was asking me, I would have said no.’ He said it was the best mixup he had ever been involved with.”

Within 12 months of joining the campaign, it successfully raised a total of \$5.5 million for the regional hospital’s cancer centre.

“He believed in co-operation, that was a big thing. He had a really wonderful way of quietly taking charge and it really was that. He really enabled the group to do what they did best,” Stead-Coyle said.

She said Schwartz never got upset, instead he concentrated his energy on solving the problem at hand.

“He had a really gentle spirit about him. He was such a successful businessman, but he never raised his voice, he never demanded too much.”,

He continued to work full time, even following several operations. In one instance, Schwartz returned to his office three days after surgery.

On Friday, Schwartz spent the day working at his furniture store and he attended Yom Kippur services at the Temple Sons of Israel Synagogue in Sydney later that evening.

A leading figure in Atlantic Canada’s Jewish community, he attended the synagogue frequently.

Sydney businessman Marty Chernin, a longtime business associate and friend of Schwartz, spoke with him following Friday’s service.

“We had a little chat and wished each other a happy holiday and he seemed all right. Then at six o’clock in the morning I had a call from his brother Harold Schwartz that he had passed away,” said Chernin, who knew Schwartz dating back to his teenage years.

“I was quite shocked. There was no visible sign to me. He participated in the service there with his wife. I was five feet away from him all evening, so I didn’t see anything that would lead me to believe that he would pass away within the next 12 hours.”

Joking about a possible conflict of interest as he chaired the cancer care fundraising campaign as he battled cancer himself, Schwartz told an audience in Membertou in April that the Cape Breton Cares drive had reached its initial \$3.6-million goal.

“I often wonder if I am not in a particular conflict, first asking for the money and then using it,” Schwartz joked with the crowd.

He spoke candidly about his own cancer battle and of the stories he heard from others affected by cancer and their desire to receive treatment at home.

“Being home with family and friends and those things that we hold dear, nothing is more important.”

Schwartz declined suggestions that he seek treatment at prominent U.S. medical centres, insisting he would get better care in Cape Breton.

Condolences from political leaders began to pour in once news of Schwartz's death began to spread.

“Irving Schwartz was not only a remarkable businessman, his legacy as a community leader and philanthropist will be the achievements for which he is most remembered,” Premier Darrell Dexter said in a statement.

“Cape Breton was very fortunate to have a leader like Irving Schwartz,” added Deputy Premier Frank Corbett. “His passion for life, family and community will be sorely missed.”

He is survived by his wife of 52 years, Diana Schwartz, his four children, and four grandchildren.

Source: Cape Breton Post <http://www.capebretonpost.com/news/local/entrepreneur-and-humanitarian-irving-schwartz-dies-at-age-81-4333/>