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## **INTERVIEW: The Difference of a Lifetime**

By: Susan Carey Dempsey, 1/11/07

onPhilanthropy spoke with Dr. Jeffrey Solomon, President of The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies (<http://www.acbp.net/>), a family of charitable foundations operating in Canada, Israel, and the United States. Their mission is to encourage young people to strengthen their knowledge and appreciation of their history, heritage, and culture, as well as to support programs to improve the quality of life in Israel.

### **Q. What are some of the ways the Bronfman Philanthropies have strengthened young people's knowledge of their heritage and culture?**

A. Twenty years ago, Andrea and Charles Bronfman started their philanthropies in Canada, Israel, and the United States. One, birthright israel, is a unique project which brings thousands of young people on their first educational trip to Israel as a gift. When Michael Steinhardt and Charles Bronfman started this program with \$16 million, people laughed. They said, "Why subsidize people who can afford the trip?" To date, 112,000 young people age 18-26 have gone through the program. Researchers have followed 8,000 of the program's alumni. Now, there are 28 donors among them who have contributed more than \$5 million. The 2007 budget for birthright israel is \$56 million, of which the government of Israel now bears one-third of the cost.

### **Q. Tell us about your programs in Canada.**

A. American culture so dominates Canada. They have no sense of their own heroes and national myths, so our mission is to encourage Canadian history and heritage. We began the Historica Foundation in 2000, which has produced television series and provides internet resources such as access to the encyclopedia to increase awareness of the Canadian heritage.

### **Q. What is the plan for the Philanthropies' assets?**

A. Charles Bronfman plans to spend down the foundation. The idea is to make things happen in one's lifetime. One great thing about a living donor is that he not only can provide funds, but his Rolodex as well. It's also helpful that he is amazingly comfortable with risk birthright israel is a perfect example.

### **Q. Risk - that's one of the points Warren Buffett made in making his historic gift to the Gates Foundation last year, the need to take risks with philanthropy.**

A. Yes, and another great thing about Warren Buffett is that there's no ego in the way he did it.

### **Q. This year we've seen the collaboration between the Gates Foundation and Buffett, and we've heard a lot about philanthropists leveraging their contributions with other individuals or organizations. Do you think this trend will grow?**

A. Yes, as more people begin to understand: "I don't have enough money to solve this problem." There's this "Aha!" moment that living donors come to. I wrote a monograph on philanthropic partnerships with Mark Charendoff, where we discussed the changing landscape in this field. There's a whole new taxonomy to be learned. Some philanthropy doesn't fit under the old models Google.org, for example. If it actually involves a group of businesses, how will the IRS look at it? But I think it's a healthy trend. Every advance of society has been governed by the marketplace. Look at how much good resulted from Henry Ford's Model T.

### **Q. Can you give us an example of how one of your partnerships has worked?**

A. In Israel, the Foundation has concentrated on education reform, adding programs to extend the school day in the wake of budget cuts when funds were shifted to defense. The gap between rich and poor widened because the rich

have the ability to hire tutors to compensate for what the schools lacked. Keren Karev, as ACBP is known in Israel, launched Project Involvement in the fall of 1990 as a small pilot project in Jerusalem and Beit Shemesh. Five years later, the Ministry of Education decided to partner in a \$65 million program. The project is now in 110 communities, regional councils and other authorities, in 636 schools and 1,256 kindergartens and reaches 33,330 kindergarten children and 202,062 elementary students. We're about to spin off that program in Israel, which will become the National Endowment for Educational Reform.

Some of the other innovative programs we've developed in Israel include IPSO, the Israeli-Palestinian Scientific Organization, which provides grants to scientists from both communities working together on agricultural and medical projects. They work over the internet, so don't have to deal with crossing borders.

We are also supporting the production of a history of Jerusalem. This will be the first history written without a Muslim, Christian or Jewish perspective, which could be very different from any we've seen before.

**Q. Although the ACBP plan is to spend down the foundation funds, do you engage with the next generation in planning to pick up the mantle of philanthropy?**

A. Our program called Grand Street for young members of Jewish family foundations teaches 18-28 year old adults about the roles and responsibilities they can expect when going on foundation boards. We conduct a historical exercise: tracing their family history and overlaying it with Jewish history.

Elaine Fogel  
Thursday, January 11, 2007

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My son is returning from a birthright israel trip this evening. He never would have considered it had this program not been available.

I was also working in the Canadian Jewish community when birthright was launched and interviewed many young adults returning from the first few trips. The effect on them was profound. I'm hoping the same will be true for my son now.

Thanks to philanthropists like Charles and Andrea Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt, their vision and commitment is changing the way some very fortunate young Jewish adults see their connection to Israel and their traditions. I laud their efforts.

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**About the Author**

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