



Morton Brownstein in 1988 in Montreal.
for The Globe and Mail

Morton Brownstein, 85: shoe-store magnate, philanthropist, challenger of Quebec language laws

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Published Monday, Jun. 03, 2013 07:24PM EDT

Last updated Monday, Jun. 03, 2013 09:53PM EDT

Of medium height, with an impeccable sense of style and an omnipresent smile, Morton Brownstein was known by many names, including Mr. B, Grandpa Morty, the Candy Man and All-Round Mensch. At their core was a tireless, generous man who ran a national shoe empire, loved his family and tried all his life to share his sweet fortune with others, whether it was giving 10 per cent of his company's pretax profits to charity, raising the funds to build a hospital emergency department or handing out hard candies that he carried in his pockets.

Mr. Brownstein, who died of kidney cancer in his Westmount home on May 23 at 85, ran the business begun by his father like it was an intimate family enterprise, even as Browns Shoes grew

into more than 40 stores across the country, with 1,200 people on its payroll. As far away as Vancouver, employees thought of him as someone they could turn to for help.

“When I was pregnant with my son, he would come and check to see how I was doing,” said Liz Godin, the store manager in Vancouver’s Pacific Centre mall. “It’s like he’s still here with us. I was completing a sale the other day and I thought, ‘I have to make this good because Mr. Brownstein is watching over us.’”

Ms. Godin’s colleague, Fran Miller, recalled relationship advice he once gave her. “He told me, ‘Always treat the other person better than you would yourself,’” she said.

It was a lesson instilled in him by his parents, Benjamin and Minnie Brownstein, who also taught their five offspring to value hard work, tradition and giving back to the community. Benjamin Brownstein was a self-made man who immigrated at the age of 15 to Montreal from Romania and toiled initially as a peddler, using a horse and buggy to travel throughout rural Quebec to sell his wares. Friday night Shabbat dinners with family were sacrosanct, as was a nightly recitation of the *Shema*, the prayer that is the centrepiece of Jewish morning and evening services.

Morton was born Jan. 12, 1928. Curious and driven, he underwent surgeries to correct ulcers when he was a teenager and the superintendent in his high school always made sure to meet him at during breaks with a glass of heavy cream to coat his roiling stomach.

He managed to channel that drive after he graduated and went to work in the department store his father now owned on fabled St. Lawrence Boulevard; although he had two older brothers, it was he who eventually took over running the family business.

“He was always moving, always doing something,” said his daughter, Janis Brownstein. “He was a force of nature and his stamina throughout his life could put young people to shame.”

In 1943, his father opened a shoe shop on St. Catherine Street in downtown Montreal, then the city’s shopping hub. After a fire gutted the property in 1954, Mr. Brownstein, by then the store’s manager and the father of three children under the age of 5, turned it into a showcase for designer shoes and accessories.

Five years later, he opened the company’s flagship store in a shopping centre near where he grew up, with European designer shoes that cost a whopping \$29.95. His parents didn’t think it would work. They were wrong. He knew people would want to buy beautiful footwear from Europe by designers such as Salvatore Ferragamo and Bruno Magli once they were exposed to it.

To that end, before the launch of the flagship store, he flew to Italy for a shoe fair without speaking a word of Italian, forging in with a new Polaroid camera, a sharp eye and a fearless, friendly mien that broke through language barriers.

Along the way, the company name lost its apostrophe, a casualty in the battle over Quebec’s language laws. As Brown’s became Browns, Mr. Brownstein, who believed in the elegance of compromise, joined four other Montreal-area businessmen in 1984 to challenge the constitutionality of French-only signs.

“We want to be able to use bilingual signs, although we are not asking for equality,” he told *The Globe and Mail* back then. “All I want to see is fair representation of English, something like 20 or 30 per cent in size and content.”

At the same time, he feared that if they won the case, anglophones would ultimately lose the war because the provincial Liberal government would have a choice between becoming a target for the Parti Québécois or overriding the decision by invoking the notwithstanding clause in the Constitution.

His prediction came true after the Supreme Court rendered a decision in December, 1988, that found the province was within its rights to require businesses to use French as the more prominent language, but English could not be prohibited altogether. So came the notwithstanding clause, which Ms. Brownstein said was one of her father's greatest disappointments.

"We were in Florida and my father got a call from the premier's office," she said. "The premier wanted to meet him but he refused. He wanted – he hoped – the question could be dealt with through the courts. And it was, until premier Robert Bourassa overrode it."

Although Mr. Brownstein ceded the presidency of the company to his son, Michael, in 1999, he didn't stop travelling, visiting stores or being involved in the general operations.

Mr. Brownstein met the love of his life at the age of 13, when they were both attending Strathcona Academy in Outremont. Bernice Greenfeld was always up for whatever adventure he proposed, be it a night at the opera or a week away. She was the calm figure who balanced him out, his other half, his better half, the woman who he was married to for more than 65 years and the mother of Janis, Cheryl and Michael. Self-taught, they were habitués of the opera, symphony, local English theatre and the Stratford Festival in Ontario.

Whenever he had to put his initials to a piece of paper, he scrawled "MLB," for "Morty Loves Bernice."

His numerous honours – including the Order of Canada and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Award and the Human Relations Award of the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews – reflected the myriad causes he supported financially and for which he volunteered. Among them were the Club des petits déjeuners (the Breakfast Club), which ensures that Quebec schoolchildren in disadvantaged neighbourhoods get a nutritious meal to start the day, and the Montreal Association for the Blind, where he was the only board member actually to attend the annual Sports Challenge awards evening to meet the young athletes.

Most of all, there was the Jewish General Hospital, which was his heartfelt passion. In 1984, he raised \$20-million for the emergency department that bears his and his wife's names. In 1998, he raised \$50-million and in 2003, he did even better, raising \$200-million. In 2009, Mr. Brownstein was given the hospital's lifetime achievement. In 2012, he was named director emeritus.

"He had a golden heart," said his long-time cardiologist, Ann Walling. "Even when he was down to 108 pounds and dying, he was positive and optimistic, always trying to make other people feel good."

During the hospital's Weekend to End Breast Cancer, a marathon two-day walk through Montreal, he and Mrs. Brownstein could be found at various stops along the way, handing out candies and encouragement. One year, after he had back surgery, their daughter and granddaughter stood handing out the candies in their place.

"People kept asking, 'But where is that nice man?'" Ms. Brownstein recalled. "It reinforced for me the effect he had on people from all walks of life."

Morton Brownstein leaves his wife, three children and five grandchildren.