

Obituary: For Samuel Belzberg, giving to community was a responsibility

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GLENDALUYMES

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Samuel Belzberg, a Vancouver businessman and philanthropist, has died.

It was never about the name on the building. For Vancouver businessman and philanthropist Samuel Belzberg, giving back to his community was an honour and a responsibility.

Belzberg died Friday evening in Vancouver after a massive stroke several days earlier. The 89-year-old was at work when he collapsed and was rushed to hospital.

“He was at his desk, just like he would have wanted,” said his daughter, Wendy Belzberg.

An Officer of the Order of Canada, Belzberg was chairman and chief executive officer of Vancouver-based [Gibralt Capital Corporation](#), a private real estate and capital investment firm that operates throughout North America.



Frances and Samuel Belzberg in 2016. MALCOLM PARRY / PNG

He was also a well-known philanthropist, funding projects in Vancouver and elsewhere in North America, including the [Simon Wiesenthal Center](#) in Los Angeles, which is dedicated to “preserving the memory of the Holocaust.”

Belzberg put up the initial \$500,000 to start the centre in 1977. Since then, it has grown into an influential, non-governmental organization dealing with issues of racism, prosecution of Nazi war criminals, Middle Eastern affairs, extremist groups and hate on the internet.

Locally, he headed the initial \$13.5-million campaign to aid Simon Fraser University’s downtown satellite campus. After donating \$1 million himself, he gracefully thanked late SFU chancellor Jack Diamond “for picking me to have this opportunity.” The Samuel & Frances Belzberg Atrium at the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue is named after him and his wife, Frances.

SFU president Andrew Petter said Belzberg’s legacy will live on at the university.

“Sam was a larger-than-life figure,” he said Saturday. “He was one of the builders of SFU.”

In 2016, Samuel and Frances were given the President’s Distinguished Community Leadership Award. When Petter called to tell Belzberg, the businessman immediately launched into a discussion of contributions he hoped to make. The university president had to interrupt to tell him about the award.

“He had a huge heart and a huge belief in education and the power of education,” said Petter. “He had an ongoing interest in the university and how it was supporting young people and their futures.”

Belzberg was also the founder of the Dystonia Medical Research Foundation. He set up the charity after one of his children developed the little-known neurological movement disorder that is characterized by involuntary muscle contractions.

Belzberg’s recent work with Action Canada, which aims to create and maintain a network of outstanding young Canadians who will influence public policy, was “super, super important to him,” said Wendy. “He was working on developing new leaders who would stay in Canada. His children left Canada, so he wanted to find ways to keep leaders in the country.”

Belzberg attended every Action Canada meeting and interviewed candidates himself. Simply writing a cheque was not good enough.

“He had the big vision, but he was involved in the little details,” said Wendy.



Jack Blaney (left) and Sam Belzberg in 2003 after setting up a program to bring together the brightest and best young Canadians to exchange views and ideas in order to resolve some of the problems facing Canada and the world. IAN SMITH / VANCOUVER SUN

Accolades were unimportant. When his children were growing up, he kept plaques and tokens of appreciation hidden under a bed.

But university degrees were another matter, with every one of his children’s and grandchildren’s degrees proudly displayed on his wall.

“Whenever any of us would get a degree, he would say ‘I want the parchment,’” said daughter Lisa Belzberg.

He was also a voracious reader, devouring biographies and autobiographies. He required very little sleep, often arriving at the office at 5 a.m., much to the chagrin of the grandchildren he sometimes employed in the summer.

Belzberg would work hard, but he always had time for his family, sometimes taking them along on fishing trips, one of his favourite pastimes.

“He was hands-on in business and hands-on in parenting,” said Lisa.

In everything he did, he tried to instil in his children and grandchildren a sense of responsibility, teaching them to give back to society. Many of them have taken his message to heart.

Belzberg’s parents immigrated to Canada from Poland, landing in Alberta just before many of their friends were sent to Nazi concentration camps.

“Mom and Dad lost so many of their brothers and sisters,” he told Vancouver Sun columnist Daphne Bramham in 2003. “Yet Canada took them in. This country takes people in, so why shouldn’t we help people? It’s our responsibility to help. I think about it every day.”



Peter Brown, Sam Belzberg, Ted Turton and Doug Varley during the Big Brothers Whistler Golf Classic. It raised almost \$150,000 for Big Brothers in 1997. VANCOUVER SUN

After moving to Vancouver in 1968, he formed Western Realty with his brothers Hyman and William, amalgamating 16 private companies. They sold Western Realty in 1973 in order to buy Far West Financial Corp. of California.

In 1970, he formed First City Financial Corp., which was renamed First City Trust Company in 1978. By the late 1980s, First City Financial had diversified into a holding company with assets in excess of \$5.4 billion US. The company crashed in 1991, but Belzberg continued to be involved in a number of companies through Gibralt Capital Corp.

Samuel Belzberg is survived by Frances, his wife of 68 years; his children, Cheri, Marc, Wendy and Lisa; 16 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren.

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