

ISEF: Celebrating 40 years of bringing higher education to Israel's underprivileged students

After 40 years at the helm of the ISEF Foundation, Nina Weiner continues to be inspired by her lifelong drive to ensure that Israel's underprivileged children receive a higher education. Founded from a deep moral imperative to eliminate injustice, ISEF creates opportunities through scholarships, social advocacy and leadership training for young Israelis from underserved and immigrant communities to earn degrees from undergraduate through a post-doc. Today the organization also actively counters Israel's brain drain.

Born in Egypt to Israeli parents, Weiner returned to Israel with her family at the onset of the State in 1948. Although Weiner's family had accommodations with other family members, many immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East who arrived in the same period often landed in the harsh conditions of the Ma'abarot (temporary housing set up for their absorption). It was on a visit to these absorption sites during the mid- 1950s, as a member of a European research team, that Weiner first encountered North African and Middle Eastern refugee children. "My heart went out to them. I knew that because of negative stereotypes and their much lower socio-economic status, they were ill equipped to assimilate into Israel's economic and social mainstream."

It was in the 1970s, however, when she again witnessed the deplorable conditions and the "ethnic gap" in Israel's development towns that she knew "we could no longer tolerate a situation where we have two kinds of Jewish children in Israel," she explained. "We needed to find a way to bring equality to the situation."

With some luck, she was introduced to the late Lebanese-born Jewish banker, Edmond J. Safra, and his wife, Lily Safra, and with their support, ISEF was born in 1977. The three founders strongly believed that the key to renewal lay in developing Israel's intellectual capital rather than projects which sought to physically rehabilitate Israel's poorest peripheral areas.

The Safras and Weiner together dreamed of narrowing Israel's socio-economic gap by providing higher education to gifted students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, they believed that empowering students through high academic expectations, and through leadership and social advocacy training, would have reverberating effects.

Lily Safra, today the Honorary Chairwoman of the foundation and a great humanitarian in her own right, has continued her generous support of ISEF since she helped to cofound it.

The 400 students who receive scholarships from ISEF annually are also required to donate time to their communities each week and to undergo leadership training. It is a methodology that has yielded staggering success. Since 1977, ISEF has granted more than 20,000 annual scholarships to students living in Israel's poorest regions and enabled more than 6,000



Nina Weiner and Lily Safra with ISEF International Fellows at a benefit gala in New York



ISEF/Hebrew University students and children work together on a neighborhood rehabilitation project

young Israelis to earn degrees from Bachelor's to PhD, often in prestigious programs overseas. They return to Israel and become leaders in government and medicine, academia and technology.

To ensure that Israel benefits from the intellectual capital of these scholars, students who choose to remain abroad are obligated to return the financial support they received from ISEF. According to Weiner, however, more than 90% return to Israel.

"My mother empowered me, I empower the students, the students empower their children, and finally their success circles back to empower me, so that I can continue to empower more students."

One scholarship recipient from a family of six children who received an ISEF scholarship along with two of her siblings recently told Weiner, "It is as if we were in the desert. ISEF gave water to the three of us and we bloomed: I became a professor, my sister is a social worker and another is a doctor."

Weiner doesn't allow herself too much credit and notes that she has gained as much from the success of ISEF as she has put into it through the years. "My mother empowered me, I empower the students, the students empower their children, and finally their success circles back to empower me, so that I can continue to empower more students," explained Weiner.

Dr. Inbal Rachmin: An early loss inspires a remedy for heart disease

As one of six children Dr. Inbal Rachmin was still required to keep her textbooks in good shape so that her mother could donate them afterwards to charity. Her parents supported the family with only high school educations, but Rachmin's mother always upheld the same world view as ISEF founder, Nina Weiner — one in which community service is mandatory.



At 16, Rachmin lost her mother to breast cancer, an experience which inspired her decision to pursue medical studies. Today, with support from ISEF for her post-doctoral research, Rachmin heads a laboratory at Harvard University specializing in cardiac research. She focuses specifically on potential treatments for ischemic heart disease, which is characterized by reduced blood supply to the heart muscle, and which is the primary cause of heart disease throughout the world.

Rachmin previously completed her doctoral research at the Hebrew University under the supervision of Prof. Ehud Razin and Dr. Sagi Tshori where she discovered a protein called Erbin which acts to stop the pathological growth of the heart muscle. Patients suffering from heart failure are often lacking the Erbin protein, and Rachmin and her colleagues demonstrated that damage to this protein leads to excessive growth of the heart muscle, and a decrease in its function.

This groundbreaking research had profound implications for breast cancer research. Over 30% of breast cancers are treated with the Herceptin drug, which carries a serious risk of causing heart abnormalities. Rachmin's discovery that Erbin has the ability to combat heart disease in Herceptin-treated breast cancer survivors has garnered international acclaim.

In 2015, Inbal received the Kellerman Young Investigator Award for Excellence in Research from The Israel Heart Society. Her other honors include: the Henry N. Neufeld Award for Most Notable Publication from The Israel Heart Society (2014), the Presidential Excellence Award from Hadassah College, to name just a few.

Despite her multitude of achievements, Rachmin donates her time as a professionally trained medical clown in local hospitals and it was this commitment which caught the eye of Weiner — and for that Rachmin is grateful both to Weiner and to the legacy of her mother.

"My family isn't able to offer us any financial support, so it is because of the ISEF fellowship that my husband and I are able to make it here," she said.