

GIL BLUTRICH: BUILDING DREAMS

BY: MARCIE SOMERS

Gil Blutrigh is standing beside a pier in Port McNicoll, Ontario. He's speaking in animated tones and gestures to two potential buyers about his latest development project. It's an ambitious project to be sure. Two years ago, the Israeli businessman paid \$100 million (U.S.) for 325 hectares in Port McNicoll, a picturesque harbor town located on Georgian Bay, 90 minutes north of Toronto.

Back in its heyday, Port McNicoll was a major transportation hub that connected goods and people between Eastern and Western Canada via railway and its waterways. The port also acted as a gateway where grand passenger ships would shuttle tourists between Canada's Great Lakes, and for a brief time Port McNicoll was even referred to as the "Chicago of the North". However, in the late 1960s following the closure of the port and CPR line, Port McNicoll's fortunes turned for the worse.

Referring to the town, Blutrigh intends to "take a diamond that has been buried and forgotten about, polish it off and make it shiny and new." His plan is to preserve the town's Victorian charm and build 700 luxury waterside homes, each with its own private yacht deck, 1.5 million sq. ft. of commercial retail space, which includes a harbour centre, two boutique hotels and a marina. For an ambitious developer like Blutrigh, taking "a blank canvass and creating a city that is meaningful for the people in the village, the province and eventually the country," is a huge and very exciting opportunity.

At a town hall meeting later that evening, he passionately addresses local residents with his development plans and ambitions to put Port McNicoll back on the map. It's clear from the buzz that they're just as excited as he is. "If people sense that your interest is coming from the heart, they innately know that you are on their side and that your intentions are pure," Blutrigh says of his project's effect on the town's residents. "The locals recognize that I see them as my partners and want them to be participants in their growing economy. Together, we will build a city that will become a national treasure. It's the chance of a lifetime to be able to do something significant that will change peoples' lives, and I feel very honored to be given that opportunity."

Following his heart and creating opportunities for the benefit of others is something Blutrigh has done since his early days as a young entrepreneur. Born in Ra'anana, Blutrigh, the eldest of four siblings, whose family struggled through the years, aspired to become financially secure from a very young age. "At the age of 14, my dream was to own my own home and I knew that my parents would not be able to help me," he recalls. "Doing a simple calculation showed me that based on the average salary in Israel, it would take me 25 years to be able to afford a condo, so I had to do something to ensure I had a roof over my head."

It didn't take long for the young Blutrigh to find ways to make his fortune. He began by selling housewares to stores throughout the country and was so successful, that at 16 years old, he became the youngest person in Israel to pay income tax.

After serving in the Israeli air force for three years, Blutrigh studied hotel management. Parallel to his studies, he worked as an independent real estate broker in his hometown of Ra'anana, and in 1988, following his graduation from hotel management, opened his own brokerage firm.

Wanting to distinguish himself from his competitors, Blutrigh decided to do things differently. Back in the late '80s installing computers and computerizing systems, providing agents with cell phones and using advertising and public relations as tools to help sell homes was unheard of. Not accepting the normal paradigm of how to sell real estate, he filled his brokerage house with both people and systems that are now the norm.

In 1990, Blutrigh sold the brokerage and opened Mishorim, a real estate development company where he began to acquire real estate and develop residential projects. One of his first projects was the development of Israel's first gated community. A fan of the popular '80s primetime T.V. series, *Melrose Place*, after watching the show, Blutrigh immediately recognized a need to build a similar concept in Israel. In keeping with his mantra of thinking outside of the box, he approached the selling of this community differently. He persuaded several Israeli celebrities to invest in the project by giving them a reduced price. In turn, they provided free publicity and acted as spokespeople. The idea obviously worked, because within 90 days, all the homes were sold.

In 1998 Blutrigh moved his young family to Toronto, where he opened Skyline International Development, a private investment and management company specializing in real estate development, commercial and hospitality revenue producing properties, media development and asset management. Since its inception, Skyline has achieved an average of 80% return on equity, despite uncertain financial times.

A self-professed non-hotelier, Blutrigh opened two downtown boutique hotels in the last four years. Each hotel represents a different side of Blutrigh; one is chic and dynamic and the other is calm, serene and focuses on meditation and relaxation. "On one hand I'm the guy who can meditate and relax (every year he goes to an Ashram in India to meditate), and the other side of me is more outgoing and dynamic."

In 2004 he opened the Pantages Suites Hotel & Spa in downtown Toronto, a 111-room boutique hotel with 12,000 sq. ft. of state of the art conference facilities, a 15-treatment room spa, restaurant and martini bar. In its first year of operation, the Pantages Suites Hotel & Spa was voted the "Best Luxury Hotel" in the city by Toronto.com, and obtained worldwide recognition.

In 2005, Skyline opened the Cosmopolitan Hotel, a 97-room Zen-like luxury boutique hotel in the heart of the city. Contemporary yet iconic, the hotel offers travelers an atmosphere designed to rejuvenate their spirit, complete with a Zen-influenced spa and

“energy consultant.” Purified air pumps through the hotel and rooms are equipped with meditation mats and a meditation channel. At the energy centre of each suite is a natural gemstone fountain, which creates a soothing centerpiece. In 2006, the Cosmopolitan Hotel was the only Canadian hotel to make the Conde’ Nast Travel Magazine prestigious list as one of the 60 Very Best New Hotels around the world.

With all his success, Blutrigh firmly believes in giving back to the community. Charity is extremely important to him and he believes that “as a Jewish person and a human being, we have an obligation to assist society as much as we can to help make our social environment better. This is a responsibility of a Jewish person, a human being and a representative of our country.”

Once upon a time, his idea of giving back to the community was cutting cheques; but all that changed for him after giving someone the ride of a lifetime. A licensed pilot, Blutrigh was asked by a friend to fulfill the dream of an eleven-year-old cancer patient, who wanted to fly through the sky above his home. “I let him hold the stick to maneuver the plane and when I saw how happy he was, I felt a surge of happiness in myself, like I hadn’t felt before. I understood in that very moment to give and see the happiness in people that you’re helping is so much more rewarding than cutting cheques at the office.” Since then, Blutrigh has engaged himself to community in a much different form, as seen with the establishment of his NGO in Israel.

In 1996, he created “Bright Future” an organization dedicated to helping troubled youth. “We take kids from the streets between 16 – 18 years old and teach them about business. But more importantly, we provide them with loads of self-confidence by demonstrating that although they have been thrown out by the establishment, they can be successful and productive.” One of his former students graduated, at the head of his army commander course – a huge coup, considering that most troubled kids don’t get accepted into the army.

Back in Toronto, Blutrigh, who is a fan of Canada’s rich and diverse homogeneous society, sits on the Board of Directors for Toronto’s Reel World Film Festival, which strives to recognize the excellence and achievement of emerging diversity in film, video, and new media. “The structure of Canadian society is so unique. Unlike Israel which is a big melting pot, Canadians work together to respect people of all different nationalities, so it’s a real honor to be able to demonstrate how people from different cultures and backgrounds can work together and at the same time give struggling artists a venue to showcase their work.”

Blutrigh is also actively involved with The Israeli Forum, an independent leadership body of the UJA Federation that represents the cultural and business interests of Toronto’s Jewish Israeli community. It’s something very near and dear to his heart. “Coming from Israel nine years ago was very difficult. While many immigrants leave to improve their lifestyle, I was very established, so to leave a good life for the unknown was very scary. I didn’t speak very much English, so I had to learn the language, lifestyle and the culture all at once.”

Although he was too busy setting up his business, Blutrigh eventually discovered that Israelis moving to Toronto did not feel welcome in their new community. “I had heard a lot of prejudice against Israelis. Things like, ‘Why are you here? Why aren’t you home defending Israel?’ and I felt very bad about that.”

In his role with the IFC, Blutrigh is working hard to change the paradigms within the Israeli and the Canadian Jewish community from both sides. “The Toronto Jewish community needs to better understand the Israelis and vice versa.”

While doing research for his new role, Blutrigh was amazed to discover that approximately 20% of Toronto’s Jewish community are Israeli Canadians, most of whom have no connection in the community. He discovered that many had isolated themselves and were not connected to any Jewish establishment; many of them weren’t even sending their children to Jewish day schools. Looking at that from a long-term perspective, and the continuation of the Jewish culture, Blutrigh recognized that one of the first things he had to do was find ways to build a strong community for the next generation. After much hard work, the IFC opened the first Israeli Sunday school last year.

There have been other successes. Last year, the IFC held an Independence Day celebration where more than 3,500 people showed up. More than 5,000 people attended this year’s celebration. And, in March 2007, they held a special event for volunteers from the Israeli community. Expecting no one, much to his delight and surprise, a few hundred people came. “If you know how to work with these people – to speak their language, not specifically Hebrew, but in their mentality, you can achieve great things.”

If that weren’t enough, Blutrigh is also committed to alleviating homelessness and in December 2005, hosted the Coldest Day Symposium, an initiative of the Homes First Foundation that strives to end chronic homelessness. And in 2006, he was asked to be an honorary member of the El Salvador Consulate in Canada. In his role, Blutrigh is helping to establish a better working relationship between the two countries.

When not at work or involved in the community, Blutrigh spends time with his children, ages 10 –17, and writes poetry and paints to relax. Often in the summer, he can be seen at the helm of his 40-foot yacht. Obsessed in his 20s and 30s with becoming financially independent, he has learned over the past few years to find a balance in life. “For my first 14 years of working I was extremely focused on financial success, but now I’m older, wiser and working harder to create a balance.”

“I’m trying to focus on the here and now; to live in the moment and enjoy life.” It’s a process, he admits, which has taken years to achieve; but now that he has done so, he couldn’t be happier. “Basically I’m a guy who tries to enjoy life and take one day at a time. I’m having a blast.”