

'Canadian Idol' judge Zack Werner national spokesperson for 'ALS Walks for Canada'

Jewish former Winnipegger has fond memories of River Heights youth

By MATT BELLAN

Jewish former Winnipegger Zack Werner had a different career path than his late father, Leonard.

But in some ways, he's following in his dad's footsteps.

Leonard Werner ran the family business, Dominion Soudak Fur Auction Sales.

In the mid-1990s, he was one of the people

responsible for securing the support of the federal government to overcome the European wild fur import ban. The Canadian government's support made possible the first international animal welfare agreement on trapping – the Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards – and helped preserve the livelihoods of many Canadian natives.

Zack Werner, a successful Toronto entertainment lawyer and a judge on "Canadian Idol", the national CTV talent show, is showing his idealism in another way.

He's national spokesperson and honorary chair of ALS Walks for Canada.

"I started last summer," Werner said in an interview February 25, during a visit to Winnipeg.

The walks are generally over the summer and fall. They're like any such fundraising project, where people pledge money for friends and relatives to walk kilometres.

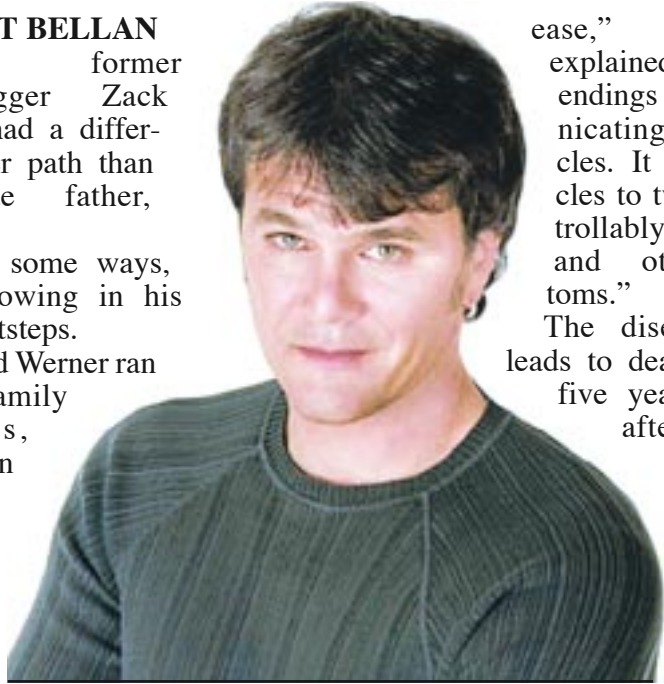
"In Manitoba, 600 people who walked raised over \$100,000 for ALS. In Toronto, a couple of thousand people took part."

And similar ALS walks are starting up in towns and cities "all over Canada".

Werner agreed to serve as national spokesperson because his dad died of ALS a decade ago.

"Like so many families with people who've died of it, I took it as an obligation to get involved. I'm in the public eye, and tzedakah (charity) is a very important part of my life."

ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis) is "a neuromuscular dis-



ZACK WERNER, national spokesperson and honorary chair of ALS Walks for Canada: He felt an "obligation" to get involved because his dad, Leonard, died of ALS 10 years ago.

ease," Werner explained. "The nerve endings stop communicating with muscles. It causes muscles to twitch uncontrollably sometimes, and other symptoms."

The disease, which leads to death "three to five years, at best" after it starts, causes "general weakness in hands or legs, numbness, and affects your ability to swallow. Eventually your breathing

goes. It's a terrible disease."

The odds are five in 100,000 for people to come down with ALS.

And drugs don't cure or even treat it. There's just palliative care, to ease the suffering.

Werner spent some time during his visit here at the Brummitt-Feasby ALS House, "the only ALS hospice in North America."

The facility gets ALS patients out of hospitals, offers 24-hour care to up to five, and lets residents be "more community oriented".

"CANADIAN IDOL" JUDGE SINCE 2003

Werner was also here as one of four judges for "Canadian Idol", the national CTV talent show - a role he's had since 2003. "We hope to find some great singers here."

"I always wanted to do something in front of the cameras," said Werner.

The "Canadian Idol" experience has been "fantastic," he exclaimed. "We travel from one coast to the next, hold discussions with parents, grandparents, kids," audition and choose contestants for the show, and comment on the show about contestants' performances; viewers phone in, to vote for the winners.

Werner admits that he, himself, tried to make it in the entertainment business.

A member of amateur bands since his youth, he studied English and theatre at the University of Minnesota. He then studied law; his dad suggested that as a fallback, if he didn't make it as an entertainer.

(Cont. on page 9. See "Zack Werner".)

Israel's Eurovision entry stirs pop contest controversy

By DAN BARON

JERUSALEM (JTA) – It may be the ultimate in forgettable mass-communications kitsch, but the Eurovision Song Contest has special resonance for many Israelis. Founded just a few years after World War II, the annual competition is an opportunity for Europeans to flaunt an ever-changing array of pop songs that seem to serve as an alternative

national anthems — devoid of any overt nationalism — and then choose a winner through an elaborate phone-in vote.

That sense of dizzy continental togetherness is catnip for Israel, which was allowed into Eurovision in 1973 and treats the event as part of a perennial campaign for acceptance abroad. But Israel's entry for the 2007 songfest has triggered controversy for lyrics that seem to touch on the most combustible of current crises — Iran's nuclear program.

Titled "Push the Button", the song speaks of "crazy leaders in the world who are trying to trick us" and "rockets flying and landing on me." A line from the chorus becomes even more specific: "I wanna have a lot of fun, just sitting in the sun, but nevertheless, he's gonna push the button."

Contributors to a BBC chat room were quick to discern a reference to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose calls for Israel to be "wiped off the map" and Holocaust denial have stirred international concern that there could be a cataclysmic war if his country attains the means to produce nuclear weapons. In Finland, where this year's Eurovision takes place in May, objections were directed at Israel and its band of choice, hip-hop cum urban-pop group Teapacks.

"It's absolutely clear that this kind of message is not appropriate for the competition," said Kjell Ekholm, a Eurovision organizer, adding that contest officials would convene to discuss whether to disqualify "Push the Red Button."

Israelis remained defiant. The Israel Broadcast Authority, which selected the song last week, said it had submitted the lyrics to the European Broadcasting Association and encountered no problems. Teapacks' lead vocalist Kobi Oz, meanwhile, argued that "Push the Red Button," which also contains lyrics about crime, should be appreciated for capturing the Israeli national mood.

"The song has a line that talks about 'several crazy leaders.' If and when the British read the song, they decided to draw the conclusion that it aimed at Iran," Oz told Ma'ariv. "It turns out that the BBC thinks that Ahmadinejad is crazy. We didn't mention names. 'The State of Israel

(Cont. on page 23. See "Israeli song triggers Eurovision controversy".)



KOBI OZ, lead vocalist for the Israeli band Teapacks: His song, which seems to touch on Iran's nuclear program, triggered controversy.
Credit: Brian Hendler/JTA

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People/community news

Memories of Gaza

(Cont. from page 5.)

impossible to “blame” them for having settled in Gaza, because, after all, successive governments of Israel allowed them to live there. It’s also hard not to be sympathetic to the evacuees’ criticism of the Olmert government’s foot-dragging in building permanent housing for them. As *The Jerusalem Post* reported on January 23, 2007, Prime Minister Olmert has pledged to begin building new homes for 400 Gaza evacuee families in the Lachish region, between Jerusalem and Be’er Sheva within six months.

The evacuees’ sense of abandonment by the Jewish world was heightened after Israel’s war with the Hizbollah when North American Jewish federations responded swiftly to aid those who suffered as result of the war. They noted that nothing had ever been done by the organized Jewish community to help alleviate their economic suffering as a result of the evacuations.

More than 18 months after the evacuation many Gaza Jewish evacuees are unemployed – particularly farmers – and are still living in temporary dwellings. Many have lost their businesses and those who have reentered the work force are often

earning far less than they had previously.

A couple of months ago, the leadership of the UJA-Federation of New York and North America’s United Jewish Communities (UJC) made a commitment to lead a study group to Israel to assess the needs of the Gaza evacuees with an eye to providing financial assistance. This came in the aftermath of several Orthodox rabbis in Queens having ceased promoting the UJA Federation annual campaign, and having their congregations raise funds for the Jews who were evacuated from Gush Katif. The UJC is now raising \$2.5 million dollars for the evacuees.

In my view, the more that the UJC can be involved in lessening the despair of the Jewish evacuees from Gaza, the better. It has become very clear that the government of Israel has been unwilling and/or unable to meet its commitment to provide an efficient program necessary to rehabilitate the evacuees.

When Ariel Sharon made the decision to unilaterally withdraw from Gaza, the focus of the Israeli government was on ensuring that the evacuation would take place without violence between Jews. Very little effort, however, seems to have been spent on providing the necessary infrastructure to alleviate the expected economic, social and psy-

chological distress of the evacuees.

The plight of the evacuees must be remedied sooner, than later.

The writer is a Winnipeg Jewish visual artist and commentator.

Zack Werner

(Cont. from page 1.)

Werner moved to Toronto, joined a professional rock band, and then formed his own heavy metal band, Thick as Thieves, which released a CD and two music videos played on MuchMusic.

The band relocated to L.A., but eventually broke up, and Werner returned to Toronto. “I got tired of auditioning time after time,” he’s quoted as saying on “The Official Zack Werner Fansite”. Instead, he pursued a career as an entertainment lawyer, using his connections and knowledge of the music business to his advantage, before joining “Canadian Idol”.

Werner has fond memories of his childhood and teenage years in River Heights.

“There were so many (Jewish) families with kids our own age...we’d always have a basketball or football game going on.”

He was president of B’nai Brith Youth Organization AZA’s 38’s Chapter, a BBYO winter convention coordinator and held other positions with that Jewish youth group.

“I think I dated more girls through that than anything else in my life.”

Werner said he feels good whenever he returns to Winnipeg for visits.

“You never stop being a Winnipegger...When we leave, we never stop being part of the community.”

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Our Little Shtetl

(Cont. from page 6.)

of Winnipeg Act Review Committee, which held hearings throughout the city prior to recommending changes. He subsequently established a general law practice which he continued until the end of last year, when he quit law to become a fulltime mediator.

“I have done a lot of arbitration and a lot of teaching across Canada over the years,” he says. “I was vice-chair of the Manitoba Labor Board in the late 1980s.

“I had also been doing quite a bit of mediation for the Human Rights Commission and between aboriginal groups and the government. Over the past few years, I had come to realize that I enjoyed bringing people

together more than I liked the adversarial aspect of law.”

Cherniack is one of only two Manitobans who have both a nationally-recognized chartered mediator as well as a chartered arbitrator designation.

Cherniack notes that most matters requiring his services arise from misunderstanding. He cites as an example a matter involving a land dispute between a First Nations group and the federal government. “There was a tremendous amount of misunderstanding and delay,” he recalls, “and a lot of anger about the delays.”

He notes that harassment is a major issue in the workplace that can have devastating results if not dealt with properly. Harassment complaints also are often a result of misunderstandings, he adds.

“My background as a labor lawyer gives me a lot of credibility as a mediator in business and institutions,” he observes. “People trust me because they can be assured that I don’t have any vested interests in terms of management.”

The writer is a Jewish Winnipeg freelancer.

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Jewish Child and Family Service reaches out to isolated women

JCFS is offering an eight-week group for older women whose quality of life may have diminished and are felling isolated and alone. Taking Charge, as the name of the group suggests, will help women to feel empowered in an effort to find ways to make positive changes in their lives. The group will be led by Gail Thau, a

trained counselor with expertise in the field gerontology. The group will concentrate on helping women rebuild their lives, make new friends and become more involved in the community. As space is limited early registration is encouraged. Please read the ad below for details on how to register for this group.



TAKING CHARGE - A WORKSHOP SERIES FOR OLDER WOMEN

A group for older women to discuss issues such as life transitions, self esteem and making connections. Through support and education the group will empower women who feel isolated to make positive changes in their lives, meet new friends and become more involved in community activities.

Dates: Tuesdays, April 17 to June 5 (8 weeks)
Time: 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.
**Location: Jewish Child and Family Service
Asper Jewish Community Campus
123 Doncaster Street
Registration Fee: \$25.00
Group leader: Gail Thau MSW**

Free Transportation will be provided if required.
Contact Gail Thau at Jewish Child and Family Service -
by March 16th at 477-7445
to apply to participate in this group.
Space is limited