

## A DEVOTED LIFE

### A BIOGRAPHY ABOUT CLARA MINTZ

After my mother Clara Mintz retired from Jewish Family Services she was asked a question: “what are your hobbies?” Without any hesitation she answered “I’ve devoted my whole life to people – people are my hobby.” I think these few words tell a substantial amount about the kind of person my mother was when she practiced her profession as a social worker, as a volunteer in the community and as a daughter, wife and parent.

I was once flattered by a comment made about Clara. She was referred to as a pioneer in the Jewish Community. I explained that she was not an original pioneer but rather a modern pioneer –she came to this community when it was starting its new growth after World War II. More than that, she was a thinker and a doer. She was a woman ahead of her time whose impact on people and families exists even until today.

My late father David was an amazing person who prided himself in creating genealogies and binders full of family history. Part of my father’s legacy was his pictorial history of Clara Mintz from birth, through her youth, university years, marriage, family, employment and contributions to our society. The binders are packed full of report cards, photographs, newspaper articles and miscellaneous items such as records of my mother’s vaccinations. The reason I mention all of this is that it has assisted me in developing an understanding of what made Clara Mintz “tick”. Although it is difficult to pin point her greatest contributions, it appears that her involvement in Jewish Family Services was most central.

My Mother was born April 16, 1917 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. My grandfather Abe Abramovich was a Rumanian who escaped in the early 1900’s, married Bettie Ghitterman and moved to a town of 250 people called Bethune, Saskatchewan. My mother was the youngest of three children. My grandfather operated a General Store and owned a farm outside of Bethune. My mother attended a school comprised of one room for grades one to twelve. There were no movies, no electricity and no running water.

Financially the family survived with more pride than money. Things were tough during the depression. I believe this experience helped mold my mother's personality and developed her quality as a hard nosed person. She also helped her father with the store. She attributed her "people person" quality to this experience. My grandmother (after whom I am named), whom I never met, passed away in 1936 when mom was 19 years old. Before that she took care of Bettie as her brother and sister had already left home. I believe this experience imbedded into mom's heart the desire and passion to take care of others.

Mom did not receive a Jewish education as we know it today. Every year my grandfather took the family to Regina for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. My mother never learned how to read Hebrew and she never had a Bat Mitzvah. However, she was raised with a very strong Jewish identity – one that she applied to her role at Jewish Family Services. She once recounted the fear that struck her and her family when the Ku Klux Klan marched through Bethune one evening. She had to remain hidden in her own home with the lights out in the hope they would not be bothered.

When my mother graduated from high school she had the highest average in the Saskatchewan Departmental examinations. Through my mother's life she always had a great penchant for reading and learning about anything and everything. One of her greatest skills was her ability to analyze and reason out solutions to complex problems. This was a great asset she possessed, in particular to carry out her duties as the executive director and social worker at Jewish Family Services.

Why did Clara choose social work as her career? In those days most women did not go past high school or pursue working careers. My mother chose social work not because she knew what it meant, but rather "it related to helping people". With that in mind she applied to and was accepted at the University Of Toronto School Of Social Work in 1939. She took courses such as Economic Basis of Social Life, Government and Finance, Public Welfare Administration and Policy, Child Care and Social Statistics. The reason I mention all of this is that this background in education played a large role in the types of activity she participated in after her graduation in 1942. When she graduated in 1942 she was one of twenty-five in her class.

Her first position was at the Baron De Hirsch Institute in Montreal. This was for one year between August 1942 and August 1943. She resigned because she was heading back west to get married. The executive secretary Ethel Ostry wrote a letter accepting my mother's resignation and stated: "I want to express to you the appreciation of the agency for your devoted services. Although you have only been with us a brief year you have done a remarkably good job in undertaking a heavy case load, and carrying with it good judgment and maturity. You not only carried your responsibility seriously but also in good humor." This was an amazing tribute considering she had just graduated out of social work school. My mother recalled that she earned \$85.00 per month and was assigned a poor district to work in. Her clients included a Jewish prostitute and gangster.

In August 1943 my mother married David Mintz a graduate in Dentistry at the University of Toronto. They got married in Victoria which was the place where he was undergoing training for service in the Canadian army. He came from Regina. They hardly knew each other before. In most modern marriages husbands and wives spend a lot of time together and are not separated. Not my father and mother. The ink was hardly dry on the Ketubah when my father was required to go to Europe as a Dental Corp captain in the Canadian army. As a newly graduated social worker, my mother had no choice but to find work and wait for her husband's return.

The event of marriage and sudden separation strengthened my mother's resolve in life. Sometimes I felt that what she went through in life up to that point, the depression, and loss of her mother, going away to Toronto for social work, getting married and then having to endure immediate loneliness, probably contributed to the strength of my mother's moral fiber. She was not athletic. She was well-read, exceptionally bright and prepared to take on any and all challenges.

Between 1943 and 1945 Clara Mintz worked at the Vancouver Family Agency, the Regina Welfare Bureau and the Winnipeg United Hebrew Social Services. When she later worked in Winnipeg she received a whopping \$125.00 per month. However, the job in Winnipeg included resettlement of Holocaust survivors and Canadian Jewish Congress Orphans. She found that

these unfortunate victims came from a completely different culture and that the general community was not much help.

These intensive and difficult experiences in the social work field involving assistance to the Jewish Community instilled in my mother the conviction that a case worker must provide personal service in order to create effective results. Clara Mintz developed a strong sense of dedication to the causes concerning the family. As will be seen this attribute contributed to the success of Jewish Family Services in Edmonton.

After David Mintz returned from the war in the beginning of 1946 they decided to move to Weyburn, Saskatchewan. This was where my father decided to start his dental career. I was born in November 1946. Although my mother proceeded to raise me she discovered a colleague from the University of Toronto who lived there. Clara Mintz found a way to put her social work background to work. She and the colleague set up a club for retarded girls and helped them find work in the community.

In 1949 David and Clara Mintz decided to move themselves and their 3 year old son to Edmonton. The reason related to the discovery of oil in Leduc. Another reason was to raise their son in a Jewish community. After arriving here they bought a home on 133 Street and 105 Avenue which later turned out to be down the street from the Talmud Torah School. Clara Mintz was up to child rearing in those days. My brother Jack was born in March 1951. At that time my mother was one of three social workers in the City of Edmonton. Somehow people found out about her and she started to become involved in National Council of Jewish Women and the John Howard Society.

The John Howard Society was a service for assisting ex-convicted persons to be reintegrated into the community. My research does not disclose why someone like Clara Mintz would get involved. But involved she did. Her involvement culminated in her becoming the first woman President of both the local chapter and the provincial association. During the month of September 1950 she worked in the local office of John Howard Society which included the handling of cases.

Before discussing Clara Mintz's involvement in Jewish Family Services, a brief description of the services available for Jewish people at that time would be in order. In 1942 the Jewish Welfare Society was formed as a result of the work of a committee comprised of representatives of National Council of Jewish Women, Aznoches Orchem and Federated Budget. This committee was approached by The Edmonton Community Chest to accept a small annual grant. The society incorporated in 1952. B'nai B'rith was also involved in the delivery of social services. Every year reports were provided concerning the work of the society, but what bothered Clara Mintz was the practice of revealing the identities of those persons who were recipients of the services. This spurred Clara Mintz to convince National Council of Jewish Women to incorporate the Jewish Welfare Society. This resulted in the establishment of a part-time agency.

The Jewish Welfare Society operated on a budget of \$2,000.00. Clara Mintz did five years of voluntary casework for the Jewish Welfare Society and after it was incorporated she served as President of their Board for three years. She did everything on that tiny budget. The work included fund raising, community organization and case work.

In the meantime Clara Mintz found other concerns which drew on her involvement. She was a founder of the Mental Health Association. She was a Board Member of the John Howard Society of Alberta including a three year stint as president of the Local Advisory Council. She was a member of the Board of the Family Service Bureau. She was a founder and first President of the Home and School Association of the Talmud Torah School. In addition, she established with two others, the Edmonton Branch of the Canadian Association of Social Workers.

Clara Mintz had another talent. She loved to write. In August 1956 she became the Edmonton correspondent for the Western Jewish News. For many years she wrote articles for the Winnipeg based newspaper about people and events in the Edmonton Jewish community. This column later becomes known as the Edmonton Jewish Pipeline. The reporting was later taken over by David Mintz's first cousin Goldy Mickelson.

During this time Canada was concerned about its defence system. The Americans convinced the world that the USSR may invade North America. The defence of Canada was a great concern of the government of the day. Clara Mintz was selected as one of few Edmontonians to attend a course about Civil Defence Welfare in Arnprior, Ontario at the Federal Civil Defence College. We later found out the course concerned evacuation from the City of Edmonton in the event a bomb or bombs are dropped. This was a secret mission at the time. Clara's potential role would have related to evacuation procedures. I have a letter signed by the Director of the Civil Defence of Edmonton acknowledging her services and the provision of an Honorarium in the sum of \$4.00.

One would wonder how she could do all of this and still raise a family which was comprised of two sons who were under 12 in age. After Bruce was born Clara Mintz stayed at home to raise him until he started school in 1951 at the old Talmud Torah School on 103 Street across from the Weinlos Clinic. After Jack was born in 1951 Clara stayed at home but did volunteer work and part time work until Jack reached kindergarten in 1956. As Jack Mintz recalled our mother, she was one who always had the meals on the table every day on time. That was her way. She had the special skill of being able to manage time effectively.

This brings us back to the Jewish Welfare Agency. In January 1955 her career as Council's volunteer social worker came to an end. Evelyn Kline National Council's local President in expressing gratitude for her service stated: "Yours has been the job of unsung hero – working behind the scenes, efficiently and confidentially and your annual reports have always opened our eyes to the very important service that you contributed to our community"

Between 1955 and 1958 Clara Mintz served as President of the Agency. In 1958 Clara Mintz became its director. In 1960 the name was changed to "Jewish Family Services". The reason for the change was Clara Mintz believed that the use of the term "welfare" depicted something that would apply only to a certain segment of the community. She firmly believed that the family was the core of the community. Jewish Family Services focused on parent/child relationships, marital problems, the elderly, and delinquency.

One issue that concerned Clara was the legislation of the Provincial Government to place children for adoption in any home regardless of background. Her goal was to ensure Jewish children are adopted into Jewish homes. Clara Mintz appeared before the Child Welfare Commission to fight for and to guard the principle that Jewish children should be adopted only into Jewish homes. She convinced the powers that the Province could adopt out only if the adoption of Jewish children into Jewish homes is not effected within twelve months. Clara Mintz's concern did not end there. She was instrumental in making sure that non-Jewish children adopted by Jewish parents underwent a proper conversion to Judaism.

Another concern that she had was the competence of people who called themselves social workers. She felt that the uniqueness of social work was casework and not counseling. She felt that the role of the social worker was to work with the family to help provide opportunities, strengthen values and help children grow to be self supporting self-respecting individuals. In dealing with the people administering provincial welfare assistance to the unfortunate, Clara Mintz saw that these people called themselves social workers without having the necessary education supporting that designation. Clara expressed the firm belief that to be properly designated as a professional social worker one must have a master's degree or equivalent in social work. Her passion for credibility for her profession led to the establishment of the Alberta Association of Registered Social Workers. Naturally Clara Mintz was a founder.

Clara Mintz had a concern and interest in Mental Health. She was one of the founders of the Mental Health Association of Alberta.

The aged became another focal point. Through Jewish Family Services a survey was done of elderly in the Jewish community. Clara Mintz was very instrumental in creating the Jewish Senior Citizens Drop In Centre. Jewish Family Services became the facility for providing case work services on site for the members. In addition she was instrumental in the creation of the Kosher Meals on Wheels to serve the elderly (1977). These important institutions remain in this community today.

In addition to the above she remarkably found time to provide professional fundraising assistance for State of Israel Bonds and setting up conferences for the local Zionist Organization. She also assisted the B'nai B'rith Youth organization by acting as a professional during some of their conventions held in Edmonton.

During the early 1960's the Jewish Community Council in conjunction with the United Jewish Appeal sought to establish a Jewish Community Centre. The intent was to have all of the beneficiaries of UJA which included Jewish Family Services move their offices to the central location. Clara Mintz fervently opposed such a \idea. The main reason was independence. She believed that Jewish Family Services could potentially lose its autonomy which was a key principle of its operation. Secondly JFS's clients would be seen at this central office and lose their right to confidentiality. Her battle against the establishment succeeded.

While she was developing the image of JFS her other involvements brought her to greater heights. In June 1963 she was named to the Board of Governors of the Canadian Welfare Council representing the Canadian Corrections Association. She was also one of three delegates appointed to the National Board of Directors of the John Howard Society. The appointment was publicized in the Edmonton Journal on June 27, 1963.

During the mid 1960's while carrying on these many projects Jewish Family Services was selected by B'nai B'rith to trouble shoot problems involving children at the camp. It was around this time that Jewish Family Services assisted the Camp Director in ensuring that Jewish children who could not afford the camp fees to be able to attend on a confidential scholarship. Jewish Family Services was the sole determiner of financial qualification. The names were kept confidential.

Clara was a very well read individual. She loved reading books and even joined a book of the month club. Somehow she found the time to read all of the leading novels of her time such as Leon Uris' The Exodus and countless others. She always took hard copies and kept them in a form of library in her home. Furthermore, she followed the news both in the newspaper and on television. The amazing part of all of that was she was partially blind in one eye. Her level of

comprehension was extremely high. She could effectively debate issues and make her point in a succinct fashion without making the recipient feel personally attacked.

As a social worker in the community with all of the positions she held she believed that she must be a role model to make sure her own family was raised properly. My mother often laid down the law to my brother and me regarding appropriateness of behavior. I used to tease her about the fact that she taught me to be good outside the home and my rebellion as a youth was to be bad in the home so no one would know about it except my parents. My father was very laid back and was more proud of my positive accomplishments and did not want to get involved in my “shtick”. When I took psychology during my undergrad studies at the University of Alberta I would try to analyze my mother’s psyche which only aggravated the situation. However, she was a role model for own children because she taught us and reinforced in us a strong Jewish value system.

Clara Mintz turned some of the Annual General Meetings of Jewish Family Services into forums generating debate on important issues. In 1975 she succeeded in bringing in Robert Kaplan Member of Parliament for York Centre in Toronto to act as guest speaker to discuss Soviet Jewry in Canada. Just prior to that time she almost started a riot at another AGM when she invited Judge Karl Rolf a Provincial Court Judge to speak on the topic of “Legalizing use of Marijuana”. Some members of the general public got wind of this open meeting and showed up at Beth Shalom Synagogue. Yelling matches took place over this very heated topic. The point to be made is that she wanted people to debate important issues about matters that affect the family and to provide exposure of these issues to those who are interested. She wanted Jewish Family Services to be the leader in the Jewish community in dealing with all issues affecting the health and welfare of the Jewish family.

I recall that other issues cropped up. Sometimes religious leaders would attempt to counsel families only to make huge errors. Clara Mintz was very vociferous in her opposition as she felt that Rabbis and others ought co-operate and assist rather than act at cross purposes to the work of the Agency.

In 1970 Jewish Family Services undertook a major change. Up to that point in time, Clara Mintz ran the agency by herself. She was the only case worker. At times she would bring in others as consultants. One such person was Dr. Syd Spaner a psychiatrist. The work of the agency was too much to be done by one. In 1970 Florence Schaeffer who originally came from New York City (her husband was recruited as a Professor at the University of Alberta) was hired as a full time social worker. The two of them worked on projects including the establishment of discussion groups for single women, widows, adult children for aged parents, parents of adolescents and parents of pre-school children. Clara Mintz believed it was important for Jewish Family Services to reach out and talk to the community and have the community members talk amongst themselves.

Clara Mintz also recognized the rise in the divorce rate amongst Jewish people during the 1971 AGM. This was reported in the Edmonton Journal on February 23. She attributed the divorce rate to extra-marital relationships and dissatisfaction with the traditional family set up. She observed that conflicts between parents and children reduced the family to procreation, child care and affection. She stated that Jewish Family Services could not get the co-operation of Jewish organizations who were more concerned about their own interests and they furthermore, could not see a community crisis. I think I can summarize Clara's approach to identification of problems as someone who always "told it like it is". The amazing part is this item hit the press. Yet as far I can recall no one came forward to question the accuracy of her statements.

One of her colleagues Walter Coombs wrote an article about Clara Mintz in the Alberta Association of Social Workers newspaper. He described Clara as a unique person in the social work field. He stated "it really isn't definable in specific terms of objective conditions- it's intuitive and feeling reaction and it relates to her ability to care and demonstrate that caring." He described her as an advocate for the "go where they are" – "start where they are" social work practice. That means no unlisted number and go to where the client is if necessary. She is very strong on demonstrating to the client that it isn't a sterile "professional" objectivity which faces them in a helping situation. Another plus unquestionably is having a thorough professional like Clara Mintz as the representative of those services. Examples like this lady are what establish the credibility of the profession."

In 1977 Clara Mintz was honored by Health and Welfare Minister Marc Lalonde on the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the introduction of the Old Age Security Pension Program. She had worked with the department since 1952. She was one of nine Canadians who received that recognition.

One of Clara's major projects was in immigration. Edmonton was the recipient of new immigrants who came to Canada as a result of international issues. Back in 1950 we have the Holocaust victims. In the 1950's and 1960's we have Hungarian, Polish and Czechoslovakian Jews. Then there was a period of time when Jewish Family Services assisted some of the new South African Jews who left because of the political climate in that country. In the 1970's and 1980's we have the entry of a large Russian community. My mother recounted that Jewish Family Services settled over 500 Russians with two social workers on staff. She recalled going out to the International Airport at 1:00 in the morning to meet a group of Russians arriving. Many of these people were professionally trained as engineers, doctors and dentists. There was a tremendous job of harnessing Jewish Community resources as well as non-Jewish people to place these people into jobs. There were great challenges in finding housing and getting them to learn English. Communication was a big problem since they spoke mainly Russian and the elderly spoke Yiddish. Unbelievably Clara could speak some Yiddish and get by doing so.

Jewish Family Services task, spearheaded by that feisty lady, was to utilize all of the Jewish community resources to get the Russians educated as Jews and to integrate them into the Jewish community. Attention had to be directed to their elderly parents so Clara Mintz was able to secure funding from the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society of Canada to assist in the payment of rent, food and ensuring proper medical care. This was done in a background where these new immigrants were frightened of bureaucracy.

Clara Mintz had the unique and uncanny ability to approach Jewish businessmen and convince them to hire her clients. I remember one telling me that Clara was one person in the Jewish community who was hard to say "no" to.

Since Jewish Family Services was a society and had an elected Board one wonders how she survived all those years being accountable to others when she was so powerful in the execution

of her duties. I have a list of the Board Members between 1960 and 1990 and in particular the names of the Presidents she served under since 1960. The Presidents were Irving C. Lyons, David Wolochow, Seda Margolus, Herbert Leon, Samuel Friedman, John Goldberg, Daniel Pekarsky, Mickey Dlin, Charles Fried, Aaron Shtabsky, Simen Fialkow, Mandle Nozick and Judith Goldsand. One former President told me that his best description was “ Clara Mintz was Jewish Family Services and Jewish Family Services was Clara Mintz.” She was able to convince her boards of the rightness of her work and the people who served were generally like minded who embraced and understood what the role of the Board was and what the role of the social worker was in the Agency.

My mother always considered the Board to be highly supportive and rarely interfered with the proper function of the agency.

Clara Mintz received various recognitions both within and outside the Jewish community. She became a Life Member of Hadassah Wizo Organization of Canada in 1974. In 1990 she was named as an Honorary Member of the Alberta Association of Social Workers.

In 1982 Clara Mintz decided to retire after a very long career. Her letter of resignation was short and sweet. It was three paragraphs long. She stated in part: “I want you to know how difficult this decision has been for me. However, after 24 years of service I feel it is time to take my leave.”

After she left Jewish Family Services she continued to deal with people but in a more limited sense. She even became President of the Eton Place Condominium Association for one year. She would laugh about how she would have to go to the Penthouse floor in the middle of the night in her nightgown to check out leaks in the building. Largely her time was spent enjoying travel with David, visiting with children and attending all of the significant events involving her grandchildren and the rest of her family. This included attending at Talmud Torah for plays and graduations, Uof A and other universities for graduations. When my father suffered a stroke in 1991 Clara single handedly took care of him providing him with the kind of quality of life he deserved that she previously provided to others.

She taught my brother and me the importance of caring for others. Since my brother lived in Toronto I was left with the major responsibility of caring for my elderly parents. My mother continued to be very independent with life style adjustment. She secured private home care for herself and David until he passed away in January 2001. I visited with her almost every night on the way home from the office. Her mind was always sharp. She would complain about the way the Provincial Government treated the elderly. She continued to be well read. When she took very ill in March 2004 I realized the end was approaching. I remember the recommendation at the hospital that she should be put in a long term care facility. I thought what would Clara do if she was a social worker? My answer took exactly one second. Keep her at home with 24 hour care. Let her live her life to the fullest. And that is what she did.

As you know she passed away July 2, 2004 in her sleep in her home. That was her wish and that is what she received.

Clara Mintz has left a huge legacy to the Jewish Community. She was modest. She did not think Jewish Family Services belonged to her, it belonged to the community. She wanted the agency to maintain the highest principles. She wanted to see that “Jewish” is not lost at JFS. She wanted Jewish Family Services to be autonomous in the community and that confidentiality is maintained at its highest. Ideally she wanted to see that social workers do not just send clients for third party service but rather they guide and lead them there and then follow up to make sure the clients are serviced properly.

Clara Mintz’s impact on many Jewish families in Edmonton has continued over the years. My mother knew everyone in the Jewish Community. She never revealed the names of those she served. People have come up to me and told me about the wonderful things my mother did for them in getting jobs. I also remember how tough my mother was on those who refused to help themselves even though they were capable of doing so. She had the ability to figure who was for real who was not. She built up strong loyalties from staff and fellow caseworkers alike.

After she passed away I received a touching letter from one of her clients which I think summarizes what I am trying to say tonight. This person lives in Israel.

“As a young child Clara Mintz became the guardian for me and my brothers after our mother and previous our father passed away. Clara respected our mother’s wish that the three of us not be separated and I thank God that we remained in the buxom of our family at first growing up in our grandparent’s home and later in my aunt and uncle’s home. This decision was one that helped to shape me as a young girl with confidence. I never doubted that the love I received at home was true and deep and for this I am truly grateful. Clara maintained constant contact with us, checking up on us until we were grown, and I always felt that her care was more than just professional. She was a special woman and I had nothing but respect for her.”

My mother’s heart was in Jewish Family Services. My father’s heart was in B’nai B’rith. My brother and I believe that their names should be cherished by the Jewish community in Edmonton by establishing a fund that would combine their hearts into one that would be beneficial to those who deserve to share in positive Jewish experiences. We have established the Clara and David Mintz Camp BB Riback Scholarship fund. This fund would be administered by Edmonton’s Jewish Family Services. The purpose would be to fund a camp experience for a Jewish camper who cannot afford to go and who cannot be subsidized by the Calgary and Edmonton Jewish Federations. I am not here fundraising but if anyone wishes to make a donation then this can be done through JFS.

Finally I thank Larry Derkach for extending this invitation to me to speak at this Annual General Meeting. Personally I would have preferred that my mother be here to speak or to do the listening. My brother and I sincerely wish that JFS will always continue in its success and that it continue to practice its work applying the highest Jewish values. In that way the work of Clara Mintz will have served its true purpose.

Bruce Mintz

May 16, 2005