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Harold Gardenswartz

'Business Icon' Grew Along With Albuquerque

By Lloyd Jojola Journal Staff Writer

Harold Gardenswartz moved to Albuquerque in 1939, back when the city's population was some 35,000 and Downtown was its bustling retail center.

The Denver native opened H. Cook Sporting Goods on Sixth and Central that year, expanded to Nob Hill in the 1950s, then to Winrock the following decade, not to mention opening Roberto's Luggage stores later on. And that's only a partial list of his business ventures.

"The funny story is that his father thought he should go to Montrose, a (Colorado) town of 7,000," said Art Gardenswartz, a son. "But he was the only one to graduate college, and he had bigger ideas. He thought Albuquerque was more attractive.

"His father thought he would be a small fish in a big pond."

But he proved a big success.

Harold Gardenswartz, a "business icon" also known for his community involvements, such as helping to establish the Ronald Gardenswartz Jewish Community Center, died Wednesday at age 91.

"I realized when I met him and listened to him that this was a guy who was very sincere on running a business," said Marvin Rubin, a former executive with Zales Corp., a company in which Gardenswartz also was an executive. "What I realized was that he cared for the people who worked for him, and he was great in terms of management — not in computer management, not in abstract management — but managing people and working with people."

Gardenswartz grew up in a Jewish neighborhood on Denver's west side and graduated from the University of Colorado-Boulder with a bachelor's degree in business, before moving to Albuquerque.

While dotting Downtown, Nob Hill and Uptown with sporting goods stores, he also started Harold's Leather Goods in the early 1960s, which also was located at Winrock.

Gardenswartz and others, including clothier Jack Stromberg, were local business pioneers in venturing to the Uptown shopping center, Art Gardenswartz said.

"He saw the future of shopping centers moving away from Downtown very early when a lot of people at the time couldn't see that," his son said.

Gardenswartz ran the sporting goods stores until 1969, when he sold to Dallas-based Zales Corp. He moved to Dallas in 1971, taking the position of president of the sporting good division for Zales, before returning to Albuquerque in 1974.

Gardenswartz worked in advertising and marketing for First Interstate Bank for several years, and also

opened Roberto's Luggage stores in El Paso, Albuquerque (at Winrock) and Midland, Texas, from 1975 to 1981, before selling all the stores in 1982. He was then associated with Gardenswartz Team Sales until retiring.

"He was a very sharp person who instinctively knew about customer service and providing something exceptional," said Art Gardenswartz, who worked for his father for years and opened a number of his own stores. "I know of 10 different people who started businesses who once worked for him. ... There were a lot of people who learned the business from him."

Rubin said Gardenswartz took a hands-on approach.

"He respected the people who worked for him and tried to help them," Rubin said.

One time, Harold Gardenswartz discovered that an employee was stealing merchandise from the company, Art Gardenswartz remembered.

The elder Gardenswartz looked at what the company was paying the employee, "and he blamed himself for causing him to steal," his son said. "He not only hired him back, but gave him a raise.

"Ethically, he understood that if he didn't pay someone correctly, you were going to encourage stealing. So, he learned his own lessons from his problems."

Gardenswartz had no ego, but did have a "keen sense of humor," the sort that, when he was 80, he dressed up as former basketball bad-boy Dennis Rodman for a party.

He had family members gather for yearly reunions, and to many he was a role model.

"Many people have come up to me and told stories about him, that he helped them in different ways," his son said.

As a term of endearment, Gardenswartz's community nickname was "The Coach" — a "people coach," as opposed to a sports coach, Rubin said.

Harold Gardenswartz over the years was involved in numerous business and civic groups, such as the Downtown Merchants Association, the Lion's and Rotary clubs, the St. Joseph Hospital Foundation Board and United Way. He was a longtime member of the Albuquerque Country Club.

He was a past president of the Albuquerque Jewish Federation and a member of Congregation B'nai Israel.

Harold Gardenswartz and his brother, Sam, put in seed money to help establish the Ronald Gardenswartz Jewish Community Center, Art Gardenswartz said.

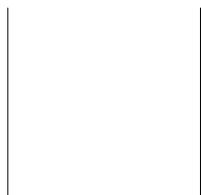
"He was a charitable man and supported those kinds of things," the son said.

Harold Gardenswartz and his wife of 68 years, Shirley, received the 2001 Harold B. Albert Community Service Award by the Jewish Community Center of Greater Albuquerque.

Services for Gardenswartz were held Friday at B'nai Israel. Interment took place at Fairview Cemetery.

His survivors include his children, Art (Sonya Priestly), Joann (Philip Carchman) and Bobbi (Gary Siegel); grandchildren, Seth, Dan, Rena, Rebecca, Jennie, David and Jonathan; and nine great-grandchildren.





GARDENSWARTZ: Known for community involvement