Allan Weissglass, an incomparable community leader, whose warmth and compassion knew no bounds, dies at 84

By Carol Ann Benanti | February 23, 2019

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Allan Weissglass, an inimitable community leader, warm and compassionate, whose deep inner strength, courage and tenacity knew no bounds, collapsed suddenly and died on Friday, February 22, 2019 in his Todt Hill home. He was 84.

A Staten Island icon in the true sense of the word, Weissglass enjoyed a special relationship with Staten Island and its countless non-profit and cultural institutions.
At the JCC 38th annual Golf, tennis & Bocce Classic at the Richmond County Country Club, are from left, Allan Weissglass and his granddaughter, Allison Cohen. (Staten Island Advance/Ca
rol Ann Benanti)

"Staten Island is fundamental to what I am," he once told the Advance. "Staten Island is special. You meet and deal with people from all social strata, ethnicity and religions. Meeting people from all walks of life, has made me a better person."

Those were the words Weissglass would live by.
Weissglass was a native Islander who spent an entire lifetime embracing family and friends to whom he will remain forever "Buddy," his childhood nickname.

A successful businessman, husband, dad and grandfather, mentor and cherished friend, he presided over the last of the Weissglass family's business holdings, also applying his substantial skills as a businessman to a legion of Island civic and cultural organizations.
His daughter, Julie Weissglass Cohen, said, "He loved Staten Island, and he spent his whole life trying to make it a better place. It’s a major loss for Staten Island, as well as our family."

"To me, he was a loving grandfather, but also a great example of a community leader that I've always tried to emulate," said his granddaughter, Allison Cohen. "His impact on Staten Island will be felt for generations to come. I was incredibly lucky to have him in my life, as a grandfather and a mentor. My grandfather loved Staten Island so much and really cared about it. We always joked Staten Island was like his other child. He never shied away from talking to people, loved talking to people, loved being social and loved our hometown vibe."
"The House of Weissglass," to which his father, Charles, referred in a family memoir, remains one of New York City's classic stories of rags-to-riches success of late 19th Century Jewish immigrants.

Weissglass' grandfather and his three sons established Weissglass Gold Seal Dairy, a successful milk processing and ice cream business.

After earning a bachelor's degree from Cornell University in dairy science, Allan put in 17 weeks on a dairy farm in New Jersey. And after working at the milk plant on Forest Avenue, he received his master of business administration degree from NYU's School of Business, majoring in corporate finance.

He worked in the family dairy and the family Gold Seal ice cream plant during his summers, "schlepping crates" like everyone else. He also spent five-and-a-half years in the US Army Reserves.

His father had retired, but the son sharpened his business skills under his uncle, Joseph. He referred to him as his "mentor."

However, it was his grandfather, Julius Weissglass, who came to New York from Austria in the late 1880s, went to work in Luchow's Restaurant as a busboy, and then advanced to be a waiter, who is credited for creating the Weissglass dairy empire.

It was Julius who was sent to Staten Island to purchase horseradish for the restaurant from local farms. And it was Julius who fell in love with the countryside and farmland of Staten Island.
Allan Weissglass, Alice Diamond and Caroline Diamond Harrison joined with many to celebrate with a Roast & Toast, Terry Troia’s 30th Anniversary with Project Hospitality. (Staten Island Advance/ Jan Somma-Hammel)

He eventually, with the help of his uncle, bought a small chicken farm off Westerleigh’s Crystal Avenue in 1898 and sold milk and eggs. With his business growing, Julius bought more land -- with 12 cows and a farm -- in Graniteville in the 1930s. Soon, Julius, with the help of his three sons -- Oscar, Charles and Joseph -- expanded the family business into a very successful milk processing and bottling plant.

However, before the family’s efforts paid off, struggles were very real for the family. Allan became president of the corporation in 1963 and ran it for 12 years. The Weissglass family also became involved with Magruder Color Company, a Staten Island company that manufactured pigments for printing ink, where Weissglass became chairman, and they operated both companies together until the dairy was sold in 1975.
During his business career, Weissglass also served on four different bank boards, learning from all of them, he would say openly. And as a result of his relationship with Magruder, he became the president of the Color Pigments Manufacturers Association, a trade association representing U.S. and Canadian pigment manufacturers, from 1982 to 1984. He also was on the New Jersey Advisory Board for the Liberty Mutual Insurance Company.

Allan's roots go back to Davis Avenue in West Brighton, where his family lived for many years. "I had a happy childhood," Allan once reminisced. "I was a typical good kid." His father was often at work. The neighborhood public school, PS 45, became his hangout and playground. As he grew -- eventually to six-feet-three-and-one-half inches -- basketball became more important to him in high school and college, where he played varsity ball as a center.

Intelligent, quiet, unassuming, shy and gentle, Allan was once described as a worker, as a doer, and not just a fundraiser. What's more, Weissglass was delighted when his friends told him, "It's expensive to be your friend," because of his gentle but determined fundraising.

In reality they reveled in whatever tune their favorite "Buddy" happened to be playing at the moment.
Allan married after college to Roberta - "Bobby" -- Lewin, and they had two children, Julie and Evan. Allan was very active in the local Jewish Community Center as a child, starting at the age of 4. He joined the JCC Board of Directors at the young age of 30. He said JCC helped him and his family -- mother and father Charles and Cele Weissglass; and two brothers, Marvin and Julian -- assimilate into the Staten Island community.

At Curtis High School, he served as captain of the basketball squad and president of the geology honor society. Today his name is listed on Curtis' Permanent Honor Roll. He graduated with honors in 1952.

Weissglass' devotion to Judaism is well-known, but he cut across religious or any other lines to serve whatever organizations that needed his attention.

He brought his talents and energy to the Jewish Community Center (JCC) and his incredible impact there is known across Staten Island.

David Sorkin, Chief Executive Officer of the JCC, spoke with Allan every day of the week.

"Irreplaceable. You cannot replace Allan Weissglass," Sorkin said.

"You cannot replace that kind of love...the love he showed for the JCC and for Staten Island. In stature and size, he was a great, great man. His impact was not just on Staten Island, but on the City of New York. His reach, his connections in the world of Jewish community centers and well beyond cannot be matched. From the Staten Island Foundation, to the Metropolitan, to the hospital (Richmond University Medical Center) -- how involved he was in every aspect of the community! He called me every day, and I say that lovingly."

Sorkin has countless stories about fun times shared with Allan. "Not long ago, we had a funny exchange," he said. "Of course most know Allan's family was in the dairy business. I told him I heard the last cows on Staten Island were at Mount Loretto."
"I knew those cows," Allan said.

"This is devastating," the CEO said. "We are all kind of paralyzed."

Allan's drive to help reached beyond the Jewish community. He was the first Jewish person to chair the board of what was then Staten Island's Catholic St. Vincent's Hospital, part of the Catholic network of hospitals in New York. The West Brighton hospital was plagued by financial difficulties, as was the St. Vincent's network, and it was Weissglass' leadership that helped transition the institution to what is now Richmond University Medical Center.

Sister Jane Iannucelli, President, Sisters of Charity, remembers Weissglass well.

"I cannot tell you what the loss of such a fine man means to so many," she said. "For myself who worked with Allan at Saint Vincent's Catholic Medical Center Board it is a personal loss. We shared many stories of our experiences of service to the Staten Island community. He so loved helping organizations achieve their mission and purpose," she said.

Daniel Messina, president and chief executive officer of the medical center, became close with Allan and his family.

"Allan's loss is a very tough one for me and my wife, Debbie," Messina said. "Upon my arrival at Richmond University Medical Center, I quickly learned that underneath that tall and strong frame was a sensitive, caring, incredibly loving man. While his universe was his wonderful family, Richmond University Medical Center and the JCC I believe were his true community loves...I was truly blessed that not only did Allan take me under his wing professionally, he and his wonderful wife Bobby also took me and my wife into their lives personally. The four of us shared many dinners and I'm so happy our most recent dinner just a few short weeks ago was to celebrate his birthday. He touched the lives of many and he truly loved Staten Island. A true gentleman and scholar. Allan truly made the world a better place. God bless you, Allan."

For Kathryn Krause Rooney, board chair of Richmond University Medical Center who served with Allan, the loss is intensely personal.

"There are a lot of hearts broken across Staten Island today. Allan was one of my best friends and he was one of the greatest people I have ever known. He was Staten Island at our very best!"
Allan Weissglass, left, with Rev. Terry Troia and Rabbi Michael Howald of Temple Israel Reform Congregation of Staten Island who received the Rabbi Marcus Kramer Humanitarian Award.

Weissglass embraced cultural institutions. He was a leader in saving and stabilizing Snug Harbor Cultural Center, which later merged with its Botanical Garden. He also served for 15 years on the board of trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art as the Island representative and continued as a trustee emeritus.

"Allan was one of the founders of Snug Harbor and an inspiration to me," said Mark Lauria, current Snug Harbor board chairman. "He was always available to take my calls and gave me great advice. I would always recall the photo of Allan walking the Harbor grounds with Mayor John Lindsay and Jackie Kennedy, in order to obtain the original licensing agreement for a cultural center. During the darkest days of being the chairman of Snug Harbor, I always knew that Allan would be there for support, and he certainly was. He certainly was influential in my staying involved."

Alice Diamond, wife of late Advance publisher Richard Diamond, and one of the saviors of Snug Harbor, knew Allan and wife Bobby for decades.

"Allan led a community," she said. "He was vital to our lives here. He always did the right thing. I always respected every decision he ever made. Our community has had the pleasure of somebody who was the best, and will not ever be replaced."

Her daughter, Caroline Harrison, now publisher of the Advance, grew up knowing the Weissglass family like her own.

“We have lost a true pillar of our community. Allan’s unwavering commitment to Staten Island was unparalleled,” Harrison said. “His was a lifetime of service, leading so many of our important institutions over the decades -- from the JCC to RUMC to Snug Harbor to the SI Foundation. His motivation was not self-promotion; it was true altruism and generosity. Most recently I had the joy of serving with Allan as a trustee at his beloved Metropolitan Museum of Art. He knew everyone there by name, from security guard to director, and they all knew him. I learned so much watching the way Allan respected and related to people," she said.
“And I cherished our car rides back and forth where we got to talk about so many things. That uninterrupted time together was my opportunity to soak up his vast wisdom. I loved him dearly. His loss stings deeply. My heart and prayers are with Bobby and all of the family.”

One of Allan’s very best friends in life was Denis Kelleher, whom he visited every Saturday in his home, and the Kelleher family. Kelleher’s daughter, Colleen Sorrentino, spoke on their behalf.

“Allan was a true and loyal friend to my Dad Denis for over 40 years, as well as the entire Kelleher family,” she said.

“Throughout the decades they served on boards together, vacationed together and shared many memorable times. They shared a love of philanthropic pursuits, and I can’t think of anyone who championed as many causes for Staten Island as Allan. Above all, Allan set the bar high for others and he taught us all about service, family and decency. We loved him and will miss him greatly.”

Allan brought his passion of helping community institutions in need to the Staten Island Foundation, which funds non-profits across the borough.

The unveiling of the Allan Weissglass Pavillion Center for Ambulatory Care. February 29, 2016 (Staten Island Advance/Hilton Flores)

Foundation Executive Director Betsy Dubovsky spoke on behalf of the board.

“The board and staff of The Staten Island Foundation are devastated by the sudden and unexpected loss of our beloved Chairman, Allan Weissglass. Allan was an important, wise and knowledgeable voice as a founding board member and Chairman for the past 11 years. As Vice Chairman, at the passing of our founding Chairman Harry Doherty, he stepped in without hesitation to help guide the work and I will always be grateful for that and his support and guidance throughout the years,” Dubovsky said.

“Staten Island has lost one of its very best friends and ardent supporters. It is a better place because of him.”

Former South Shore councilman, city official and now president of the Grand Central Partnership Fred Cerullo was a fellow Foundation board member.

“Allan’s impact on our Island and those of us who call Staten Island home is immeasurable,” Cerullo said. “I was the beneficiary of his kindness, thoughtfulness and guidance, and since serving with him on the Foundation Board these past
several years, I became the beneficiary of his friendship. My deepest love and thoughts go out to Bobby and the entire Weissglass family, and thank them for sharing this incredibly special man with me and our entire community.”

Funeral arrangements are set for Sunday, Feb 24 at Temple Israel, 315 Forest Ave., Randall Manor, at 11 a.m. There will be a memorial visitation at Casey Funeral Home, Castleton Corners, Monday, Feb. 25 from 4 to 8 p.m. In lieu of flowers, the family requests donations to the Jewish Community Center of Staten Island or Richmond University Medical Center.

Allen and Bobby Weissglass with Kathryn Krause Rooney and Daniel J. Messina after the dedication of the Allan Weissglass Pavilion Center for Ambulatory Care. February 29, 2016 (Staten Island Advance/Hilton Flores)
Rev. Tony Baker with Allan Weissglass in the lobby for the dedication of the Allan Weissglass Pavilion Center for Ambulatory Care. February 29, 2016 (Staten Island Advance/Hilton Flores)

At the Weissglass Gala honoring Jay and Lucille Chazanoff at the JCC are from left, Jay and Lucille, Allan Weissglass, Frank Oswald and Alan Bernikow. (Staten Island Advance/Carol Ann Benanti)
QUOTES FROM COMMUNITY LEADERS:

Borough President James Oddo:

“I first remember hearing the name when I was a kid, but didn’t have the pleasure of meeting Allan Weissglass until I was a young staffer to then-Councilman John Fusco, and remember being struck by how dignified he was. I got to know him better after I got elected; his decency and caring were even more apparent. And I’ll never forget the look of pride that would envelope his face whenever we talked about his granddaughter, Allison Cohen, who later went on to excel as part of our Borough Hall team for five years.

This is a genuine loss to Staten Island. He was a living link to an era gone by, an era he embodied, and one that seemed simpler, nicer...better. “

Former Borough President, James Molinaro, who served with Allan on the board of Richmond University Medical Center:

“A tremendous, tremendous loss. He was a gentle giant. I never, ever heard him say anything ill about anyone, whether it be in business or politics. Every single fundraiser I was at, Allan was there. I sat side-side-side with him at [RUMC] board meetings. It can’t be said enough...a tremendous loss.”

Former Borough President Ralph Lamberti:

“Allan Weissglass was someone who was always cooperating with one institution or another or a charity organization. And at Snug Harbor he was very instrumental.

And he was one of the original people to donate funds to Snug Harbor to help them get going. He went to Curtis High School as I did and he was also a great basketball player.”

“And we were members of what we called a Poet’s Society. We met on Friday and we said phooey, tomorrow will be Saturday. The club was started by Richard Diamond – with Irwin Steinman, Allan Weissglass, myself, and Judge D’Arrigo, and Paul Proske.”

Councilman Joe Borelli established a strong relationship with Allan and they met over breakfast regularly throughout the year to talk about life, politics and Staten Island:

“We all tend to lose our grandfathers too soon to realize the wisdom that they could impart on us; I was fortunate in that Allan was always eager to share his thoughts on life, family, business and our community. I am blessed to have spent so much time with him over coffee, and the advice he gave me towards the end of his life will shape the rest of mine. He was someone who truly cared about Staten Island, and up until his final moments he was consumed with the desire to help our great charitable organizations, from Camp Sunrise, to the JCC, to RUMC.”

District Attorney Michael McMahon:

“I am honored to say that Judy and I enjoyed Allan and his family’s friendship and support through the years. That means so much to us because he was truly a man of enormous gifts and talents who lived the maxim: ‘Of whom much is given, much is asked.’ His large heart matched his large frame. He had many accomplishments of which he could brag but his humility was most astounding. I remember when the Unit at RUMC was named for him. He was nonplussed and was more concerned about his grandchildren and introducing them to people than the fact that his generosity would cause his name to be placed in big letters on the wall. He did not serve for that reason. Although Allan will be sorely missed, he will remain as a fine example of how we should live our lives. Our hearts go out to Bobby, the children and grandchildren. “

Hoteliers, Richard and Lois Nicotra:

“We lost an iconic man with an iconic name. I remember like it was yesterday going to the stock car races at Weissglass Stadium in Port Richmond with my parents. We always loved seeing Allan and his family in Lorenzo’s. We made sure he always got broiled salmon -- even if it wasn’t on the menu. Allan will be sorely missed.”
Sister Jane Iannucelli, President, Sisters of Charity:

“He combined a quick intelligence, decency and a sense of integrity that called forth the best from those he worked with. His respect and regard for others was a hallmark of his service. The Sisters of Charity of New York will be forever grateful for his, friendship and commitment to us and our mission. I will truly miss his goodness and our friendship. The good he has done will live on in those he loves and in the difference he has made in the Staten Island community. My heart and prayers are with Bobby, his family and friends. Rest in peace, my friend.”

Victor and Kim Avis:

“Allan Weissglass was a giant in the Staten Island community. While Allan had a philanthropic impact on many organizations, his contributions to the growth and success of the Staten Island JCC is immeasurable. An involvement that began in childhood, Allan has guided and nurtured the JCC like a parent would his beloved child. Allan’s leadership, philanthropy, passion, and perseverance has enabled the JCC to expand its facilities and programs to become the leading social service agency on Staten Island. As a Staten Island family, we are forever grateful! A true gentleman and friend, Allan was respected for his work and wisdom and beloved for his genuine nature and character. In recent years Allan has been so proud to see his granddaughter Allison walk in his footsteps through her work at Borough Hall, Camp Sunrise, and now as a leader at the JCC. Allan will be sorely missed but his legacy remains forever.”

Aileen Fuchs, President & CEO, Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Garden:

“Today at Snug Harbor, we reflect on the legacy and mourn the loss of Allan Weissglass, an esteemed Emeritus Board Chair of our institution. Allan’s leadership in the business and cultural communities in Staten Island is legendary. His contribution to Snug Harbor is almost immeasurable: his incredible dedication transformed our site into a cultural center and he generously contributed time, support, and resources for decades. Personally, I will be forever grateful to have had the chance to learn about Snug Harbor’s history directly from him.”

Al Curtis, former Staten Island NAACP president, chairman of the board Salvation Army, former Commissioner of the Department of Youth and Community Development, member of the Richmond County Bank Foundation:

“He was so kind. So generous. A heart of gold. We have lost a great man. He did so much for so many. Someone you could call anytime. Staten Island is all the better because of him. He supported me when I was NAACP president. He was there for me when I was Youth and Community development commissioner. A man who was always approachable.”

Rev. Terry Troia, Project Hospitality:

“Allan was acutely aware of the presence of God in the people and the world around him. Several decades ago, I took him and Eleanor Proske, on a tour of the underside of our island. He didn’t hesitate to peer into an abandoned building, or the underpass of a Stapleton street to meet a homeless person cooking some dinner on a less than kosher campfire. He stood front and center in our homeless drop in center, filled way beyond our capacity, with scores of homeless bedded for the evening in vinyl chairs and just sighed.

Years later he gave a speech about philanthropy on Staten Island. He sat down next to me after his remarks and said something like: "All those philanthropic goals we aspire to and you got homeless people sleeping in chairs. That's the greatest need of all."

He saw God in those homeless people. He dragged me to places and people I have never met to ask for money. He jokingly referred to me as his "rabbi." It was his way of saying in his dry-humored, understated way: "We may come from different places, but I get you. And I am with you. And God is between us."

"He was a prince among men. A mensch. A righteous one. And tonight he rests with all the righteous who have gone before him. Sleep well my friend in the arms of your Loving God. Enjoy your Sabbath rest, your final Peace."
Clipping from the Staten Island Advance tells all, chicken farm came before the cows for Weissglass Dairy. (Staten Island Advance/Jan Somma-Hammel)

Julius Weissglass at his chicken farm, which then became the dairy farm in Mariners Harbor. (Weissglass family photo)
Founders of the Weissglass Dairy, sit in the plant office, from the left, Julius and his sons, Oscar, Charles (Allan's father) and Joseph. (Weissglass Family Photo)

The Weissglass Dairy plant where milk was delivered raw and processed to be delivered door to door. (Weissglass family photo)
The Weissglass Milk and Creamery annual outing group photo, 1929. (Weissglass Family Photo)

Allan Weissglass and his brothers. Allan is far right.  
(Weissglass family photo)
Allan Weissglass, making his bar mitzvah at Temple Emanuel in Port Richmond. (Staten Island Advance/Advance/Jan Somma-Hammel)

The Weissglass family portrait, l-r: Marvin, Julian, Cele, Charles and Allan. 1951. (Weissglass Family Photo)
Allan Weissglass stands 4th from the left in the back row as a reporter for the Curtis newspaper, "The Curtis Log" (Staten Island Advance/Jan Somma-Hammel)

Allan Weissglass hands a trophy to a stock car race winner at the Weissglass Stadium owners and operated by Gabe Rispoli. (Weissglass Family Photo)
Allan Weissglass, second from the left poses with borough presidents and center, Dith Pran a Cambodian photojournalist best known as a refugee and survivor of the Cambodian genocide. (Weissglass Family Photo)