



Steve Forbes Forbes Staff

"With all thy getting, get understanding."

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Why Leon Charney's Life Is An Inspiration For Us In So Many Ways

AN EXTRAORDINARY MAN, Leon H. Charney, died this week at age 77. His life story was the kind that would have thrilled Abraham Lincoln: a man who rose from the humblest of beginnings to achieve great success and, in so doing, enriched and bettered the lives of countless other people.

Charney grew up poor, and his struggling father died young. Nonetheless, Charney put himself through college and law school, in no small part from the earnings he made as a cantor. He then built a very successful law practice, specializing in sports and entertainment, with such clients as Sammy Davis Jr. and Jackie Mason.

But it was in New York City real estate that Charney made his fortune. His big plunge came in 1980, when he bought the storied Times Square building from which the glittering ball descends each New Year's Eve at midnight. At the time this was hardly a glamorous buy. The building had seen better days, and the Times Square area was a crime-infested center populated with grungy porno shops, derelict movie houses and drug-addled homeless panderers. It was not the crowded tourist mecca it is today. Charney shrewdly grew his real estate portfolio and became a billionaire. He also did very well in trading Ginnie Mae mortgaged-backed securities. Where other people saw only problems or no opportunity at all, Charney sensed opportunity.

His varied life went beyond commerce. He loved politics and once ran, unsuccessfully, for the New York legislature. He served for several years as special counsel to a U.S. senator. In that post, remarkably, he established ties with various overseas figures, most notably Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, with whom he worked to free more than 1,000 Jewish dissidents from the Soviet Union.

In the late 1980s Charney started hosting a one-hour interview show, *The Leon Charney Report*, on New York City's public television network. It attracted a notable following in the metropolitan region.

But it was in the arena of diplomacy that Charney pulled off what was, perhaps, his most notable achievement: He played a crucial, behind-the-scenes role in arranging the secret talks that brought about 1978's Camp David Accords, which created peace between Israel and Egypt. This was Jimmy Carter's greatest achievement as President, and he referred to Charney as "one of the unsung heroes of the Middle East peace process. Very few people have played as significant a role."



(L-R) Matthew Tollin, Leon Charney, Steve Forbes and Harry Hunkele attend the screening of film 'Back Door Channel: The Price Of Peace' at Quad Cinema on September 18, 2011 in New York City. (Photo by Steve Mack/Getty Images for NYC Media Group)

Charney wrote four critically acclaimed books, including one that became the basis for the highly praised documentary on the Camp David Accords, *Back Door Channels: The Price of Peace*. He was also a generous and effective philanthropist. Ever far-sighted, Charney recognized that Earth's last, vast and, amazingly, largely unexplored frontier are its oceans. Thus, he established and funded the cutting-edge Leon H. Charney School of Marine Sciences at Haifa University in Israel.

I got to know Leon in the mid-1990s, when I was pursuing the GOP nomination for President. He had me on his cable-TV show, and we hit it off. He loved history and was immensely knowledgeable about economics, business and politics. What was great about his program was that you could engage in substantive, unhurried conversations on the issues of the day. He had me back a number of times, and the experience was always positive. Leon was supportive of my political forays, for which I was immensely grateful.

A couple of times I went to him for business advice, and he was always insightful and helpful.

A heartening example of Leon's wisdom was his Israeli wife, Tzili, whom he married when he was in his early 50s. Six years ago, while taking his morning swim, Leon suffered a devastating stroke. Doctors advised that, because too much damage had been done, it was futile to even attempt heroic measures to prolong his life. Tzili would have none of it and quarter-backed a remarkable recovery. Leon was confined to a wheel chair and his speech was slow, but he could converse and go to events and to his favorite restaurants. Their union should be an inspiration to everyone, especially with regard to those words, "in sickness and in health."

When asked by FORBES several years back to describe his life in five words, Charney responded: “Eclectic, multifarious, spiritual, curious and charitable.”

A fitting epitaph for a fine human being.

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