



## Food industry titan Allen Bildner, 88



Allen Bildner

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Allen I. Bildner, former chair and CEO of Kings supermarkets and cofounder of Rutgers University's Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, died on Feb. 5. He was 88.

Bildner, who lived in West Orange and Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., also played a significant philanthropic and planning role in the Greater MetroWest Jewish community.

"All of the major supermarkets in the area — Kings, ShopRite, and [formerly] Pathmark — were started by members of this community, and they were famous for giving back," said Linda Forgosh, executive director of the Jewish Historical Society of New Jersey. And none more so, she added, than Bildner and his wife Joan, who died in 2013.

"Whatever was needed or required, the Bildners were always there to support it, and they always brought the others along with them," Forgosh said, referring to the other supermarket titans of that era.

For the Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest NJ, Bildner was a member of the board of trustees; served as cochair of Achim, for those who give at the highest level of its UJA Campaign; was a member of the board of directors of the Jewish Community Foundation; and served as vice president and treasurer of the *New Jersey Jewish News*.

“Allen truly believed that every person mattered. This is a basic Jewish value, and it’s reflected in every aspect of his life, including everything he did for the federation,” said federation president Leslie Dannin Rosenthal. “We are so fortunate, as a Jewish community, to benefit from so many important efforts that Allen and Joan initiated and supported.”

In 1997, Bildner and his wife, the former Joan Lebson, gave the seed money that started the Bildner Center at Rutgers, with the mission of providing outreach to the community and creating a bridge between the university and the public. It resulted in programs, lectures, and conferences, as well as the Rutgers Jewish Film Festival.

They also wanted the center to work on tolerance and interfaith activities. As a result, the Bildner Center offers a Holocaust education program for public school teachers, who have a mandate to teach the Holocaust but do not always have the training.

Their gift led to the creation of a Jewish studies program on campus, which ultimately blossomed into the Department of Jewish Studies at Rutgers, which, now distinct from the Bildner Center, offers both bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Jewish studies.

“His impact was tremendous in terms of transforming Jewish life and Jewish studies on campus” at Rutgers, said Dr. Yael Zerubavel, founding director of the Bildner Center and professor of Jewish Studies and History at Rutgers. “It’s really thanks to them. Both Joan and Allen were really committed to building this center that now has national visibility.”

Born in 1926 in Maspeth, NY, Allen Bildner graduated from Summit High School, and earned a bachelor’s degree and an MBA from Dartmouth College. After serving in the Navy, he went into the family business started in 1936 by his father Joseph, his mother Beatrice, and his uncles Morris and David. As chairman and CEO, he led the chain until its sale to Marks and Spencer PLC in 1988. He retired as chairman in 1990.

In 1988, he was selected from among the top 400 business leaders by *NJ Business Magazine* as one of the 10 most admired business executives in New Jersey. In 2002, *Supermarket News* included Bildner on its list of the 50 visionary food industry leaders of the last 50 years.

Bildner served on the boards of many organizations, and received honorary doctorates and numerous honors throughout his lifetime. A founder of the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, he served on the board of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. He was a member of the boards of Temple Sharey Tefilo-Israel in South Orange and New Jersey Y Camps. He also served on the executive committee of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, NJ region.

“Allen and his late wife Joan played a significant role in furthering Jewish values not only in New Jersey, but nationally and worldwide,” said Jacob Toporek, executive director of the New Jersey State Association of Jewish Federations. “The Bildner family continues to provide our community with leadership, a great legacy.”

“Last week we lost a giant in our Jewish world. Allen transformed the food industry, was a role model of philanthropy, a great friend, father, and grandfather. Most of all, Allen was a mensch,” said Steven Klinghoffer, past president of the Greater MetroWest federation.

“One word defines him: ‘exceptional,’” recalled Max Kleinman, former federation CEO. “His legacy will keep the Bildner name as a leadership model for future generations.”

Bildner is survived by his sons Robert (Elisa Spungen) and James (Nancy) and grandchildren Elana, Lizzie, Ari, Eli, and Rafi. He is also survived by his sister, Phyllis Schechter, and was predeceased by a grandson, Peter.

Funeral services were held Feb. 8 at Temple Sharey Tefilo-Israel in South Orange.

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