



Courtesy of the Milken Family Foundation

# Lowell Milken

## found<sup>ing</sup> traditions

by Tom Tugend

**W**hen Lowell Milken was an undergraduate student at the University of California, Berkeley in the late 1960s, the campus was the center of anti-Vietnam War demonstrations and social protests of every conceivable hue—with the government usually painted as the source of all evil. Milken, however, found the atmosphere bracing. “I was not politically involved for the most part,” he recalls, “but I was exposed to many new forces and ideas. For a young man, it was a great way to find out about the world and yourself.”

By the time he received his business administration degree as the school’s most outstanding student, he had come to his own conclusion as to the best way to improve society and aid the large segment of the population that was lagging behind. “I felt it more effective to create value and skills through entrepreneurship than just criticizing the government,” he observes, sitting in his pleasant office at the Milken Family Foundation in Santa Monica, California.

A direct line runs from this early perception to Milken’s own success as a business leader and his standing, according to *Worth Magazine*, as one of America’s most generous and innovative philanthropists. But there have been other influences. A crucial one was his family life and upbringing in the Los Angeles suburb of Encino in the San Fernando Valley, where he was born 54 years ago in a home his mother still occupies. Parents Bernard and Ferne Milken provided Lowell, his older brother,

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The Milken family includes Jeremy, daughter-in-law Sarah, Ryan, Aaron, David, Sandy and Lowell.

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influenced Lowell's character and philosophy of life, while his death helped channel one of the son's major philanthropic interests in medical research. When Bernard Milken succumbed to cancer in 1979, after a five-year struggle, the family was devastated.

“We consulted the best doctors and researchers, and they couldn't help,” says Milken. “I had thought that with resources and hard work you could accomplish anything, and here we found a total inability to solve the problem.”

At this most difficult time, his mother set another example Lowell never forgot. “Even in her darkest hour,” he wrote, “she continued to contribute, giving of her time and talents, never retreating from what she saw as her obligation to the larger community.”

The Milken brothers' wide-ranging interests and philanthropic causes came together in 1982, with the establishment of the Milken Family Foundation to focus mainly on K-12 education and medical research. Since that time, the Family Foundation has dispensed about \$500 million, with an equal amount given through other Milken foundations and personal initiatives.

For the Milken brothers, their Jewish upbringing and their education at public institutions were shaping influences in determining the recipients and causes of a billion dollars worth of carefully planned and involved charity.

Concrete present-day tributes to this heritage are many and include, for example, the Jewish Educator Awards; the cutting-edge Milken Community High School—combining secular and religious studies for 850 students; the Bernard Milken Jewish Community Campus,

Michael, and younger sister, Joni, with “a caring, open-minded and disciplined home, which nurtured our Jewish identity,” Lowell remembers.

The parents had arrived from Chicago in 1944 and early set a lifelong example for their children by becoming involved in their new community. “When they perceived a problem or need, they responded,” says Milken. “They understood that if you want to make anything worthwhile happen, you have to get involved—and stay involved.”

Bernard Milken was an unusual personality. He had passed the bar but never practiced law, “because he wouldn't represent anyone he thought was in the wrong,” says Lowell. Instead, Bernard became a CPA and provided business advice not only to his clients, but on a volunteer basis to a large circle of friends and neighbors as well. “There wasn't a materialistic bone in my father's body,” says the son. “He frequently didn't bill his CPA clients, until my mother told him that we needed the money.”

The father also gave his two sons some early business training by taking

them along when he visited small business clients throughout Southern California. By age 10, Lowell was working on bank reconciliations and trial balance statements.

The boys often accompanied their father to watch the Los Angeles Rams play at the Coliseum, which was surrounded largely by African-American residents. One such game proved unforgettable, but not because of the exploits on the field.

It was the summer of 1965, shortly after the Watts riots exploded. Michael Milken wrote later that “This day changed my brother's and my relationship with the (inner city) community forever...Seeing thousands of people cheer inside the stadium—apparently oblivious to the violence and despair that had erupted around them—made it clear that there was an untenable gap between perception and reality.”

The experience made a deep impact on the Milken boys and later found expression in the main thrust of their foundation's work.

His father's example profoundly

incorporating the Ferne Milken Youth & Sports Complex; and, last year, dedication of a library and technology center at the Shevach Moffet High School in Tel Aviv. Seven of the school's students, mostly Russian immigrants, were killed in the terrorist bombing of the Dolphinarium disco, and many more were injured. When Metuka Benjamin, a prominent Jewish educator, visited the school shortly after the tragedy, she saw the need for a greatly enlarged library and after her return to Los Angeles turned to Milken for financial support.

"When I phoned him, Lowell said that regrettably the foundation's budget was over-committed for the year," recalls Benjamin as her heart sank. "But after a brief pause, he said that he saw the need and that he would pay for the library out of his own pocket."

A similar open-handedness was noted by veteran educator Roberta Weintraub. "I met Lowell three years ago and mentioned to him my plans for a magnet school at his alma mater, Birmingham High School. He came back after a few weeks to learn more about it and gave his generous support."

Both Benjamin and Weintraub agree on a Milken characteristic not often found among philanthropists: He doesn't just write a check, but is a hands-on activist, who gets, and stays, deeply involved in the projects he supports. Equally notable, they say, is his keen judgment of people's human potentials, whether they are employees or beneficiaries.

**M**ilken is a man who puts passion into all his projects, but at

the present time his enthusiasm is at its highest pitch for the about to debut Milken Archive of American Jewish Music, which he created in 1990.

Thirteen years and more than \$18 million later, the archive will stand as the most comprehensive compendium ever



Regarded as an education reformer, Lowell Milken has initiated such programs as the Teacher Advancement Program, Milken National Educator Awards and Jewish Educator Awards to focus on the most critical school-related factor in student achievement—teacher quality.

compiled of musical works pertaining to Jewish life in America.

So far, more than 600 works have been recorded, some 500 for the first time, ranging from Yiddish songs and symphonies to operas, klezmer, Chassidic tunes and complete worship services. Starting in September (2003), 50 compact discs are being released on the Naxos American Classics label over a three-year



The Milken Archive features four major works by the late composer Herman Berlinski, who returned to his native Berlin with Milken for recording of his Avodat Shabbat masterpiece.

period. The foundation also plans for the future release of a 20-volume (80 discs) World of American Jewish Music, including historical recordings and oral histories, for libraries, universities and specialist collections. Performers include Jewish and non-Jewish artists, among the latter the BBC Singers, the Czech Philharmonic, and jazz legend Dave Brubeck in his *Gates of Justice* cantata. The collection will be accompanied by the first definitive textbook on American Jewish music.

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"I think the impact of the archive will be felt a hundred years from now," predicts Milken. "I see it as quite possibly the most long-lasting effort ever produced by the Milken Family Foundation."

His judgment was seconded by the late émigré composer, Herman Berlinski, four of whose major works are included in the collection. "This project represents perhaps the most important creative initiative in American Jewish music," he wrote Milken.

Milken's concern for the Jewish people naturally extends to the well-being and future of Israel, which are critical, he says, to the survival of the Jewish people everywhere.

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He and his wife, Sandy, have underwritten elementary schools and sports and recreation centers for the nearly 20,000 residents of the West Bank Jewish City of Ariel, and he has been a substantial financial supporter of the educational programs of the Zionist Organization of America, considered one of the more hawkish Jewish organizations. However, Milken says that he does not support Israeli projects on the basis of political

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ideology, but according to the merits of each individual program. In Jerusalem, “Beit Milken” houses the Jewish Center for Public Affairs, while the Milken Institute in Santa Monica is a think tank whose far-ranging studies and conferences include projects aimed at making Israel’s economy more competitive and self-sufficient.

In his private life, Milken takes one morning a week from his daily 12-hour working routine and devotes himself to Judaica studies in his large, personal library. “It started with Torah and Talmud studies with various rabbis and now includes Jewish culture and history,” he says.

Milken’s formal education has been entirely in the public school system, from Hesby Elementary School in Encino through his law degree from UCLA. He believes that his education, inspired by outstanding teachers, is what prepared him for his life’s work and opportunities. His frustration that much of present American public education is failing to do the same kind of job for the current generation of students has spurred him to devote substantial foundation resources to innovative programs to advance and reward better classroom teaching and learning. (See sidebar.)



Concert pianist and author Mona Golabek’s book in tribute to her mother, *The Children of Willesden Lane*, so impressed Milken with its story of triumph over adversity during the Holocaust that the foundation underwrote a curriculum guide and companion CD available to all educators in English, music and social studies.

“Some 90% of American children are in public schools and every one of them has the right—underline right—to a good education,” he declares. “Over the past two decades, I have visited a thousand



Dodgers slugger Sean Green and Hall of Fame manager Tommy Lasorda were part of the team opening the Ferne Milken Youth & Sports Complex named to honor Lowell’s mother. The complex rounds out the Bernard Milken Jewish Community Campus, a memorial to Lowell’s father, housing a full range of social services, cultural and recreational opportunities.

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After Milken graduated from law school, he practiced with a prestigious Los Angeles firm for five years and then was persuaded by his brother Michael to join him in his investment banking enterprises. (In turn, Lowell helped persuade Michael to move from New York to Los Angeles.)

In 1989, the brothers left Drexel Burnham Lambert and Lowell now devotes the business side of his life to a range of commercial ventures. Chief among them are two companies. One is Heron International, a leading property development firm based in London. Asked why he was involved with a British enterprise, he responds, “I am fascinated by new markets and opportunities. I knew the U.S. market, so here was a chance to learn about the European side.”

The second company is Knowledge Universe, Inc., which Milken co-founded and which creates and develops products and services for business and classroom education.

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Milken is convinced that his for-profit business enterprises complement his non-profit causes. “The effectiveness of our for-profit educational business is judged daily by the marketplace, which is not necessarily the case for foundation projects,” he says. “In that sense, our business ventures can amplify our work at the foundation to improve the educational experience of young people.”

Probably no one except his mother knows Lowell Milken as long as Raymond Sandler, who still practices law at 89. His son, Richard, and Lowell were fellow students and friends from first grade through law school, and during summers Ray and his

wife sponsored a camp at their home for 15 boys, which the Milken brothers attended.

“Lowell was already very ambitious as a boy; he always wanted to be the best swimmer and the best baseball player,” Sandler recalls. “I could have predicted that he would be a success, but I didn’t imagine that he would be THAT successful.”

These days, Milken is still a fiercely competitive athlete, but his tennis, basketball and baseball opponents are mainly his and Sandy’s four sons, ranging in age from 8 to 27. “My idea of a great Saturday night is to spend it with my kids,” he says.

Our interview had lasted two hours, a rarity for Milken, who is averse to both interviews and accolades. “My father used to tell me that we had an obligation to accomplish things, but that there was no obligation to take credit for them,” he reminisces.

A final question: In 20 years from now, what would you hope to have accomplished?

First, he responds, “that I have raised well-adjusted children. Secondly, that the Teacher Advancement Program had succeeded and that by 2023, I would have come up with 10 new ideas for contributing to the community.” lifestyles

**The Milken Family Foundation** was established in 1982 by Lowell and Michael Milken “to discover and advance inventive and effective ways of helping people help themselves and those around them lead productive and satisfying lives.” Lowell Milken has served as chairman and president since the foundation’s inception. Key initiatives include:

**Teacher Advancement Program (TAP)** — Aimed at creating a tradition of excellence and reward in the teaching profession, TAP applies a comprehensive, research-based strategy to attract, retain and motivate the best talent to the teaching profession. Launched by Lowell Milken in 1999, TAP is now operating in demonstration schools in seven states and growing.

**Milken National Educator Awards** — Individual unrestricted \$25,000 awards provide public and monetary recognition to outstanding elementary and secondary school teachers, principals and other education professionals throughout the country. Created in 1985 and today the nation’s largest teacher recognition program, the Milken Educator Awards are active in 47 states with a network of some 2,000 outstanding recipients.

**Mike’s Math Club** — This enrichment program shows students in third to sixth grade at inner city public and parochial schools that math is not only an important discipline and problem-solving tool – it can also be fun.

**Milken Scholars Program** — Through financial incentives and guidance, the program recognizes outstanding young people in New York City, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. who have overcome considerable obstacles to excel in academic performance, community service and leadership activities.

**Milken Festival for Youth** — More than a million youngsters, many from disadvantaged backgrounds, have participated in year-long community programs of their own creation, such as chronicling a community’s history, transforming a vacant lot into a park, or working with severely disabled kids. Through their hands-on involvement, students learn that each person can make a difference.

**Milken Archive of American Jewish Music** — The ambitious project is producing the most comprehensive compendium of music pertaining to Jewish life in America over the past 350 years, including the recorded works of nearly 200 composers. To learn about composers, performers and repertoire, visit [www.milkenarchive.org](http://www.milkenarchive.org).

**The Prostate Cancer Foundation (CaP Cure)** — Established in 1993 by Michael Milken with the urgent mission to identify and support prostate cancer research worldwide, this public charity is the largest private source of funds for prostate cancer research. More than \$50 million from the Milken Family Foundation has helped to support research projects in nutrition, genetics and vaccine therapy, as well as clinical trials and improved therapies.

**Epilepsy Research Award** — Through awards, grants and fellowships, the program supports cutting-edge physicians and scientists in their basic research, which underlies clinical advances and improved therapies in the field.

**Grant-Giving Activities** — Since its establishment, the Milken Family Foundation has awarded grants to more than 1,000 organizations which share the principles of its mission.