

AUSTIN COUPLE ANNOUNCES LARGEST BEQUEST IN TEXAS HILLEL'S HISTORY

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Connecting with people one-on-one and making a difference in their lives is central to the work and philanthropy of Louise Epstein and John Henry McDonald. The Austin couple has opened their homes and hearts for many charitable organizations, and recently announced an extraordinary legacy gift to Texas Hillel, the Topfer Center for Jewish Life at The University of Texas at Austin. Louise and John Henry will bequeath half of their estate to Texas Hillel.



Louise and John Henry embody the entrepreneurial spirit that is transforming Jewish student life on the UT-Austin campus. Both are successful business leaders and value personal connections in their work, in the same way that Texas Hillel utilizes an engagement strategy based on social networking and individual enrichment. John Henry, known as the “Finance Guy” on News8Austin, founded Austin Asset Management Company more than twenty years ago and built this multi-million dollar business on the principle of lifting people up and encouraging young associates to succeed. Louise has owned several prominent businesses and was a member of Austin City Council. She created the thousand-plus acre Barton Creek Wilderness Park during her tenure and continues to inspire change through her charitable giving. Both have volunteered their time to work with student entrepreneurs pursuing their own dreams.

This power couple impresses everyone they meet, including each other. Each points to the other as a source of pride and encouragement, and their teamwork is apparent in their dedication to the causes they support: Jewish life on campus, animal rescue, the arts and addiction recovery. Their interests are diverse but focused and the theme that runs through it all is that changing another’s life for the better is the most noble of causes.

Louise Epstein was raised in Austin and was often the only Jewish person in her classes. “I had to explain everything about Judaism to everyone,” she said. “In college and graduate school (at UT-Austin) I confronted anti-Semitism and anti-Israel activity.” From these experiences Louise realized that it is up to parents to raise their children until they come to college, and then Hillel is there to ensure that their Jewish identities remain strong. She is committed to seeing that Jewish students are equipped to answer questions about who they are and that they are able to advocate effectively for the State of Israel in an environment that is not always friendly.

John Henry McDonald came to Judaism later in life and maintains a healthy appetite for learning. Louise describes him as the most studious person she knows, voracious in his reading and intellectual curiosity and tireless in his commitment to excellence in all that he does. A veteran of the United States Army who was disabled after service in Viet Nam, John Henry takes nothing for granted and points to his own achievements as evidence that hard work and a dedication to the truth are the key ingredients for happiness and fulfillment. “You can’t out-give a giver,” said John Henry. “Louise and I begin each year by planning how much we will contribute, even before we know how much we will earn.” Louise added that “We always end up giving more!”

The Epstein/McDonald house has seen more than its fair share of charitable activity. It is a showplace in its own right, and its owners throw its doors open regularly so that people can meet each other, build connections and support worthy organizations. Sitting with Louise, John Henry and their dogs and cats it is obvious that a deep love for each other and the values they share make this house a home.

Louise Epstein and John Henry McDonald’s legacy gift to Texas Hillel is part of the “Create a Jewish Legacy” initiative. Texas Hillel is participating in this program with the Dallas Jewish Community Foundation. For more information, contact Rabbi David Komerofsky at dkomerofsky@texashillel.org.