

Eulogy for Janice Roth

Dear family and friends, we are gathered to honour the memory of
Janis Roth

Wife of Kenny

Mother to Alyssa and Rebecca, and mother-in-law of Carey Stein

Daughter of the late Chuck and Lynn Roth.

Sister of Blair Roth and Angelika Sengbusch, Tina Roth and the late
Steve Trowbridge, Cynthia Roth and Neil Horowitz.

Daughter-in-law of Gerry Held and the late Maris-Lee Held.

Sister-in-law to Howie Held and Naomi Ashkenazy

Janis Roth was born July 20, 1958 in Montreal. Janis was the third child of 4 children. In her younger years, everyone knew the older two, and everyone could remember the youngest one, but nobody seemed to remember Janis , so she often went unnoticed among the other siblings. So, the family joke was that she was known as Janis Who? Of course, that would change, and Janis more than made up for that later on in life.

Her parents were Charles (Chuck) and Lynn Roth who were both born in Montreal but traced their roots to Romania, Austria and Lithuania. Her father worked as a plumber and a contractor and her mother was a teacher, who went back to school later in life and obtained her own education in the classics and archeology and graduated the same year as Janis .

When I asked if Janis had a happy childhood? The unanimous answer was:

Did she ever!

“It was a loving home and she had just wonderful parents. Janis combined the best qualities of Bubbie and Zadie.”

In her early years, Janis attended Westminster elementary, then Weger, before enrolling in McGill where she was an excellent student. She did her BSW and her MSW there, with a 4.0 GPA, and won awards and a Canada Council Grant.

In the summers, Janis was an enthusiastic attendee at Pine Valley Summer camp in Montreal and her children remember her singing bedtime lullabies to lull them to sleep, songs that Janis learned at Pine Valley.

Janis loved the outside and the sunshine - she loved camp and also excelled at certain sports - she was even the winning quarterback at all the Grey Cup festival games at Pine Valley.

Later in life Janis described camp as the greatest equalizer, a place where everyone felt equal and the same, regardless of income or family background. Like her father, Janis, in her adult years, became very associated with summer camps and advocated for subsidies for children whose families could not afford to send them to summer camp.

And just like her father, - the family shared with me - there was so much that Janis did, on behalf of children, that no one knew about because they did their good work in the true tradition of how it's supposed to be - anonymously.

Just before she went to university, Janis met the love of her life – Kenny Held.

As the slightly sanitized version of the story goes, Janis and Kenny had a mutual friend: Richard Weinstein who worked late nights at the Montreal Y. Janis was Richard's perennial sweet 16 date, but they were never girlfriend and boyfriend...

So, as the story went, Janis, in her customary tight fitting leotards, was attending a late night Jazz-ballet class at the Y. Kenny walked into the office and Janis was facing Richard, away from Kenny. And Kenny said: When the woman with that gorgeous figure turns around, I am going to marry her!

So, Janis turns around and as Kenny remembers it, "we started talking and here was a challenging, intellectual, intelligent, bright woman. She was like: wow!- this is so refreshing. This was not like any other woman that I've ever met in my life.

After we'd been together for about 9 months, I said to Janis: You are the one for me, but I'm only 17, so can you wander off for a little bit and then can I get back to you?

And she said: Yeah, like I'm going to wait for you..... sure. In other words, Janis would have nothing of it – and she was not going to wait around for Kenny.

So Kenny, realized he had a good thing going that he better hold on to, and they continued dating for the next 4 years until they were married in 1981.

So what drew Janis to Kenny I asked Kenny? Well it was not just his long hair, or his 1969 Camero convertible with original paint, but without a floor – a minor detail (Kenny insisted!)

And then Kenny went on to say: That is a total mystery to me to this day. I was one of the original...WYSIWYGs. I had no pretense,...When she met me, I was wearing army pants, a nylon yellow rope as a belt, my grandfather's pea cap, and I had a lumber shirt. (That's quite an image!) I was who I was. I had no pretensions, I had no illusions, and to her, that was as refreshing as her challenging and her intellectual nature was to me.

And the children added: "She also admired his brain. She always said that he was very modest and that he was a man who knew a lot.. She found that fascinating.

And, of course, she thought he was cute!"

So at 22 years of age, Kenny and Janis were married on September 13, 1981 by their family's close friend, Rabbi Sidney Shoham in Montreal.

So what was she like as a wife? I asked Kenny

"She was remarkable. She wanted a home, she wanted love. Early in life *Shalom Bayit* (peace in the home) was her guiding force and later in life *Tikkun Olam* (mending the world) also became a central value. We had two daughters but we raised two people. We never treated them like girls. We were united in raising two people, not daughters.

As young kids they had as many trucks as they had Barbies. Rebecca had her own little tool set and if Daddy went to hammer a nail in the wall, Rebecca was right next to him on the ladder with her own little plastic hammer banging on the wall. And Janis adored that.

Kenny went on to describe how their roles evolved:

At the start, I was the man... so I took care of the finances. And we were getting 3 am phone calls about unpaid bills, and all that fun stuff. One day she said to me: What if I try? And I said: Please, I hate this stuff. And we never got another phone call about a late bill ever in our lives.

And, by the same token, we had a date one night when her parents were out of town, at her parents' house, and Janis said: I'm making chicken for dinner. Great!, Kenny said.

I sat down at the dining room table and she put a plate in front of me with a wonderful honey-glazed piece of chicken. And I sat politely and she sat down and started eating. She looked at me after the second bite and said: You're not eating. I said: Potatoes? Salad? Vegetables? She said: **I said I was making chicken.**

So from then on, I took on the cooking role in our relationship and I put dinner on the table 6 nights a week for 30 years.

To Kenny's words, their children added this:

Our parents had a partnership built on admiration and respect. And they loved to challenge themselves. We remember all the times at dinner with the both of them just going at it, having deep conversations, learning something from each other. It was beautiful to watch. She loved to learn from you... to which Kenny added "And me from her."

I asked the children to describe their mother to me:

Alyssa replied:. Our mother was a remarkable mother. The saying right now of, "Life's unfair" rings true to me now, but my mom lived every day like it was a gift.

When Alyssa lost her first tooth, as a baby, the tradition was for the parent to sneak into their room in the middle of the night and put a quarter under the child's' pillow. So Janis dutifully snuck in to Alyssa's room in the middle of the night, but underneath Alyssa's pillow Janis found the tooth and 15 pennies (Alyssa's life savings at the time) that Alyssa had already left there for the tooth fairy to take... because as the six year Alyssa explained later "I have enough money but there are children who don't."

So that's the kind of upbringing Janis gave her children, I was told.

What a wonderful way to role model kindness for children!

She always made sure she told us how she felt about us. Not just every day but every moment.

And she always found a way to make it fun. It didn't matter if it was good or bad, but you always left feeling bigger. She built us up with self esteem, and respect, and a love for humanity.

We use the expression: She filled our cups. We were overflowing. I, to this day, feel so much love, Alyssa added.

She was the type of mum for whom your birthday was her favourite day because she got to spoil you. And it wasn't just the special days where she did this. We'd come home and there'd be a present on our bed because it was just "Happy Tuesday".

She just wanted us to feel so big, and so special every day. We had no secrets in the house. And she was always our sounding board. We all went to her for advice.

If someone wasn't nice to someone in school, we'd tell our mother that day, and she told you what you needed to do the next day. I went to her one day, Alyssa remembered, and I'd say, I can't say that because I don't want to be mean. And she'd look at us and say, "You're not mean. If you say how you feel with respect in your heart, there's no ill intent there."

She was not only the best role model, she was also your best friend, who you could come to with anything. And she made us laugh a lot. She was dead serious, and the silliest woman I knew. The funniest woman. And the wittiest.

She was the best sounding board I ever met, one of the nieces added.

She was such an advocate, her niece continued. Something happened in my career that wasn't positive and she went to the mat for me and solved the problem. If it went against what she thought was the right, she became incensed and she had to find a way to rectify the problem, but it was always done with respect.

If Janis did not like something, she would often say, Do you hear what you are saying? Are you listening to yourself? Are you OK with that?

She corrected many injustices in her life with this approach.

I now want to speak for a few moments about the carrer that Janis led.

In her early years in Montreal, she was was a social worker at a place called the Miriam Home and Services, which serviced individuals with intellectual disabilities.

At Miriam Home, she had the opportunity to implement an initiative which she had written her Master's thesis on, which was: Community Alternative Living Houses. This involved taking people out of the institutions and placing them in a duplex with caregivers on the first floor, and four adults living upstairs. It revolutionized the field, and Janis was one of the pioneers of this development.

“She didn't just start the initiative and get people to donate and sponsor the homes... she picked the paint, and she spoke to the people, also oversaw the mix of the clients. She was really creating a home fior them. “

When the family moved to Toronto, Janis started work at the BJC, The Bathurst Jewish Community Centre.

As a program director, Centre Camp became part of her responsibilities.

As with most projects that she got involved with, Janis had a vision and was able to see that it could be different, better and serve larger numbers of people in a more efficient way.

Janis started at JIAS Toronto about 15 years ago and she did some remarkable things with JIAS Toronto..

“Our mom kind of took a chance on many people she hired. Sometimes, they didn’t have the right credentials, or they didn’t speak the right language, but she just said to them: I think you could do it. And they were amazed with themselves. ...She always put the right person in the right job. To her, you could teach skills but you can’t teach humanity. If she saw that in someone, she just watered the plant a little and let them get their sunlight and grow.

Janis believed in collaboration: She was one of the leaders in starting ONE OPEN DOOR, having four agencies together in one building: JIAS (Jewish Immigrant Aid Service) Toronto, JVS (Jewish Vocational Services) Toronto, Circle of Care and JF&CS (Jewish Family & Child Service) to address the social, education, vocational, settlement, mental health, home care, safety and emotional needs of the community in one shared space.

She would say: Why are we all working separately? We need to be working together.

There were a lot of stories about how she pulled people to the table. And a lot of the time people didn’t come willingly. They weren’t so excited about it because it wasn’t something they were accustomed to.

One of the people wrote that, they came as adversaries, but they left as friends.

Janis was one of the first to spearhead a poverty reduction pilot project arguing: You can't offer bare minimum and expect people to surpass, she argued. You need to invest in a small group, give them the tools, and invest in them.

For newcomers who came to Canada, language classes and writing classes, and jobs and support were essential in Janis' view. And JIAS is known, in a beautiful way, for holding the hands of the clients they have, because, as she said, to come to a new country is nothing; to come to a new country with no language and no family, is the loneliest place in the world. It takes a community to make you feel connected. And that's what she offered: a community.

One last workplace anecdote is worth sharing:

The venerable Gordie Wolfe was running JF&CS, and Janis was just starting at the BJC, and there was a little parkette at the back that was called the Gordie Wolfe Park. And there was a homeless woman who was sleeping there and she would sneak into BJC and use the showers. Some of the members were up in arms.

So Janis called up Gordie Wolfe. And remember then that Janis was really a nobody and Gordie had never heard of her.

She called him up and she said, "I have a problem. This homeless woman, I need her to have a membership at the BJC and the community is not supporting me. And it seemed liked Gordie wasn't either.

And then she said, "So long as you're comfortable with the headline in the Toronto Star saying: "Homeless woman freezes to death in Gordie Wolfe park, then you're fine." (She probably added: Do you hear what you're saying?)

And he said: Who the heck are you? Come upstairs, I need to talk to you. Needless to say, the woman got a membership and Gordie Wolfe and Janis became legendary friends. After he passed, she was the 3rd recipient of the Gordie Wolfe Award..

Not long after Janis received her diagnosis, Janis called me to reveal the difficult news. And the first thing she urgently felt the need to convey to me, after she revealed her diagnosis to me, was that she would make sure to take care of her pledge to the Habonim building fund for the new synagogue that is underway.

That, of course, was the last thing on my mind, but the first thing on hers.

But that was Janis.

(Incidentally, true to her word, she paid her pledge two weeks before she passed away.)

And then she sent me this text on March 11th:

Today I write you with gratitude. For the blessing of having had the privilege of staffing adult March of the Living- and meeting you and learning about Habonim and joining the most beautiful Jewish Shul services I have ever had the joy to experience and meeting beautiful gifted and compassionate Aviva who (after exchanging messages while I was in hospital last week) I just spoke to on the phone who is kind and warm and offered comfort, calm and advice. And who will help all us find joy and meaning in the wedding simcha. Feeling blessed right now. Thank you dear Eli. Hugs

I really do not know of another person in the world, who, faced with what she was going through, would write that “she was feeling blessed”.

But that was Janis

Before I close, I want to read to you two short letters that were sent to me after her passing;

1) The first is from her dear friend, Bernie Farber:

Janis Roth was a woman of many hearts.

She loved people. She would move mountains to make peoples lives better and she did just that in her role as Executive Director of JIAS. There are refugees here today from all walks of life, rescued by Janis Roth who moved those mountains to bring them out of danger to the safety of our Nation.

She loved her friends, of which, my wife Karyn and I count ourselves. She was a wise counsel, a needed critic when necessary who never hesitated to let us know when we were right and when we were wrong. She always did so with grace, intelligence, honesty and humility.

But most of all she loved her family. Rebecca & her new husband Carey, Alyssa and her beloved Kenny with a fierce strength. They were a team. Her family was her centre and she poured her love into their hearts and they embraced her with their loving kindness. It was her family's tender care that made her ultimate transition so peaceful in her last days amongst us.

The world has lost a hero. Our Jewish community is poorer today without Janis Roth's courage and moxie. I will miss her very much and I will always remember the lessons she taught me in life and in the courageous way she travelled her final road.

2) The second letter is from a Syrian refugee that Janis helped. (Incidentally, our synagogue, Habonim, along with many other groups in Toronto, sponsored a Kurdish refugee family - and Janis and her staff were with us every step of the way in the process.)

Dear Janis,

I do not believe I adequately thanked you for everything you and JIAS did for me over the past two and a half years. The day you agreed to take on my case changed my life forever. From that moment, I knew I was no longer alone, that there were friends looking out for me.

Janis, were it not for your compassion and generosity over the past few years, I know I could not have survived living the way I had, and what was going to happen to Syrians in Turkey. My amazement and joy at being in Canada hasn't lessened one bit since that July evening when I landed at Pearson Airport.

You saved my life. Everyday I live and every moment I enjoy my new life in Canada was only made possible by the fact that you committed JIAS to help bring me out of the precarious existence I was living in Turkey.

Being a single Muslim male, and you had every valid excuse under the sun to instead dedicate your JIAS' time and resources to other, perhaps more desperate cases. But you showed me compassion beyond measure and gave me the only lifeline and thread of hope I had been given since I abandoned my home all those years ago.

If you had saved just my life, that alone would have been an incredible deed, more than most people could ever hope to accomplish. But you have saved so many others. Janis, countless families and their children and children's children owe their safety and very lives to your efforts. When we were refugees, every single one of us prayed to the heavens for a miracle. You made that miracle happen.

I cannot begin to recount all the amazing and life-changing experiences I have had since I arrived in Toronto. Every morning I wake up in astonishment at my good fortune. No walk in the Cedar ravine or trip on the subway or stroll down Bloor or King ever becomes mundane. The thin thread of hope that stretched from those days in Istanbul to the moment I arrived in Canada was so very fragile and could have been shattered by any number of circumstances. Against all odds, and reasonable expectations, that thread of hope that was my salvation held thanks to you.

Doubtless, you know of the passage in the Talmud that says, "And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world." There are so many former refugees and immigrants who have new lives in this, the best society in the world, thanks to your compassion.

We all go through life hoping to live it well and to leave a positive contribution. Janis the lives of so many people has been changed because of your efforts. A part of the world was infinitely better thanks to you. Even if I wrote a thousand letters, it would not do justice to all that I owe to you. G-d bless you, and your family and their descendants, just as I have been blessed beyond measure since the day you and JIAS embraced me.

Have you ever heard a more beautiful letter? Is that letter not a Kiddush Hashem (a sanctification of the name of God, and the people who follow God's mitzvot?)

Now multiply that story by I don't know how many hundreds or even thousands of times.

When Kenny called me on Sunday morning to inform me of Janis' passing, at virtually the same time, Lia from JIAS was emailing me that JIAS had just allocated spots for two boys, Sultan and Samiel, two refugees currently in Israel, who were desperate to come to Canada, a process that Janis had started with me only a few months ago. One of the boys just couldn't stop crying, saying "it was a dream come true."

At the moment of her passing, another Mitzvah that belonged to Janis was being completed.

Last night, I asked the family to sum up some of the qualities that Janis possessed. Here is some of what they shared with me:

A woman of valour, a pioneer, a trailblazer, selfless, great sense of humour, she loved to laugh, loved a good joke, she loved the absurd. She had an incredible social conscience, she was exceptionally loyal. If you were in, you were in. She had a real light that shined far and wide. She attracted everyone.. She always made you feel like you were the most special person in world. She was highly intelligent and she loved to learn. Everything she did, she did with immense passion. She was an exceptional sister, and daughter, and wife and mother. She is just irreplaceable.

Before I close, I should just say we have barely scratched the surface of the life and legacy of Janis Roth.

There is so much more that could be said about her – please look at the eloquent Facebook post of Kim Smiley:

(<https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=Kim%20Smiley%20Janis%20Roth%20Empathy>)

The comments from colleagues and friends there, and on the Benjamin's website.ⁱ

I will leave you one with one last poem, paraphrasing **Edna St. Vincent Millay**:

My candle burns at both ends
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends -
It gave such a lovely light.

May her memory always be for a blessing...

[Delivered by Eli Rubenstein, Tuesday, May 1, 2018]

ⁱ **The Empathy Effect** is at [JIAS Toronto](#). Yesterday at 8:13am · [Toronto](#) ·

In memory of [Janis Roth](#), who lost a brief and valiant battle with cancer on Sunday, April 29, 2018.

The [Dalai Lama](#) once said that someone should be hard as thunder when it comes to principle. But soft as a flower when it comes to kindness. This summed up the yin-yang genius of Janis Roth, the late Executive Director of [JIAS Toronto](#).

Janis had Montreal moxie written all over her, but she made Toronto her home for over the past two decades. Like many social workers I know, Janis had thunder in her eyes. But one should not have been fooled. The rumble was simply love made audible.

While many of us think of the “vulnerable” as the "downtrodden" and the "marginalized," Janis stretched and massaged my definition of the term, awakening me to the reality that none of us are impervious to vulnerability.

“We are all one divorce, one pink slip, one illness or one aging parent away from needing and wanting the support and care” of a compassionate hand, Janis once told me.

While many of us are curating the immaculate story of our lives on social media, let us remember this: there is no more powerful force for the cultivation of empathy than true humility about our own fragility.

By [Kim Smiley](#) for [The Empathy Effect](#)'s Confederacy of Dreamers. Adapted from a post originally published on May 26, 2016.