



Photos courtesy of Zelda Young

# Zelda Young

## giving it voice

by Sheila Gottlieb

**W**riters search for it. Singers train it. Zelda Young was born with it: a voice. As her throaty, passionate pronouncements surge across the airwaves, one pictures a tall commanding woman—a female “Goliath” dressed to the nines ready to do battle with CEOs, Heads of State or the man on the street. And Zelda is ready to do battle—for the Jewish people and the State of Israel. But she is a petite, attractive, spiritual “David” armed with confidence gained from years of learning on-the-job and fighting tenaciously to stay on air. Her story is about the journey of a soul, life choices and change. It’s about dreaming, rolling up your sleeves and working hard to make those dreams come true.

Zelda’s father, Sam Yuchtman, a cantor, entertainer, visionary and *mensch*, was her anchor. **He recognized that her voice was her gift**, but never told her how to use it. “It’s your choice,” he’d say. “You can **do the right thing or the wrong thing**, but in the final analysis you’ll know the truth and you’ll have to live with it.” Manya, Zelda’s mother, was her best friend and confidante, while sister Clarice was her mentor and **guiding light** throughout her childhood.

Raised in a boisterous, noisy household filled with love and Jewish pride, everyone **was encouraged** to voice an opinion, and you can be sure that Zelda always had something to say. **Verbally aggressive**, she challenged everyone and everything. “In those days it was about being heard; I just wanted to be **the center of attention**.”

# “I realized a long time ago that you don’t need applause to be fulfilled.”

Gifted with a beautiful voice, Zelda began singing at the age of 4. “I sang all of the time, and through song I expressed my true feelings. You can’t cover your emotions when you sing.”

In school, her vivid imagination and provocative, impetuous nature landed her in the principal’s office regularly. Her gift of gab became her saving grace. “Talking my way out of tough situations wasn’t without consequences,” muses Zelda. “When things came too easily, I felt undeserving.” After all, she had witnessed her beloved father struggling against all odds to make his dream come true. That work ethic was deeply engrained in young Zelda.

Sam’s goal was to produce the first Jewish radio program in Toronto when ethnic broadcasting was not yet part of the consciousness of Canadian culture. Even though the State of Israel had become a reality, Jewish radio was not accepted. After his partner died, Sam joined Foster Hewitt’s radio station where he met Johnny Lombardi, Lorne Greene and Monty Hall. Johnny and Sam became fast friends because of their common ideals. Never content with the status quo, they dreamed of a multicultural radio station, where people of all faiths and ethnicity would be welcome. They vowed that if either of them succeeded in obtaining the license, the other would be the first producer on air.

CHIN, Toronto’s first multicultural station opened in 1966, and Sam Yuchtman proudly launched his new Jewish program. Zelda, busy singing in clubs, on radio and

TV, would occasionally join her father on the show, but her focus was very much on the “secular” big picture.

Brutally honest and introspective, Zelda’s soul was crying out for substance and purpose. Her dream was to attend the Juilliard School of Music and learn her craft, thereby legitimizing her talent and



Photos courtesy of Zelda Young

(l-r) Johnny Lombardi, Zelda Young and Sam Yuchtman.

earning her the right to become a star. She sensed but didn’t yet understand why that path would ultimately leave her lacking. “Looking back on it now, I realize that for me that lifestyle was a shallow dream, filled with a superficiality that would lead me nowhere.” The voice that had thrilled so many was not yet Zelda’s true voice.

As fate would have it, Sam became ill, and in his usual style gave Zelda a choice. Either she would work on the radio show one hundred percent of the time until his recovery, or the show would fold. “I didn’t think I had much of a choice so I said ‘sure’ and started doing a daily show. From my very first moment on air, it was important to connect with my audience on a pure level of honesty and integrity. Not having the benefit of a

formal Jewish education, I felt that I had to share that with my listeners. I was embarrassed that my only connection to Judaism was my inherent pride in being Jewish.”

Sam’s passing at the age of 69 had a devastating effect on Zelda and the family. Zelda stopped singing professionally and undertook a new and exciting career path: her own radio show. Gone were the days of parties and carefree living.

“I suddenly comprehended the power of the spoken word. I was reaching thousands of people at a time. Not only was I putting myself on the line every day, but also I began to hear my dad’s words echoing in my head and in my heart. ‘You’re only as good as your last show, so you constantly have to strive to be better and better.’

When asked if she misses singing and the applause, she laughs in her infectious way and replies, “Who stopped singing? I sing all the time. I realized a long time ago that you don’t need applause to be fulfilled.”

When Johnny Lombardi expanded his horizons to include television, Zelda was hot on his heels. The more he rejected the concept, the more determined Zelda was to prove that she could host a top quality TV show. Within a short period of time Zelda formed the dynamic team who brought *Tapestry* to life. She proved to be both charismatic and witty, with a talent for sourcing out cutting-edge topics and exciting guests. “During the process, I learned to listen with my ears and my heart, and to let the person finish his thought before I’d jump in. My voice was no longer the most important one.”

Zelda took on the tremendous responsibility of producing and hosting both her radio and television shows. It took a concerted effort to maintain a standard of excellence and balance between the two formats, but spontaneity and being *au courant* are part of Zelda's DNA. On one occasion she started a TV show with long curly hair. During a commercial break, she coerced the hairdresser into cutting her locks and completed the program with a new "do."

Young was a vibrant force at the top of her game, but something kept whispering to her that she had a greater purpose. She was singing slightly off key.

In the early '90s, when the study of Kabbalah went mainstream, Zelda began interviewing Rabbi Philip Berg and his wife Karen on a regular basis. The teaching of Kabbalah reawakened her interest in mysticism and Zelda began to explore the benefits of being Jewish, first on the show and later in her private life. The inner voice she had tried so long to subdue rose rapidly to the surface. It was only after Zelda began to learn at the Kabbalah Center that she finally hit those elusive "high C's," feeling more centered, connected, concerned and committed. Her direction and focus shifted from the material to the spiritual. The sounds of superficiality falling away were music to her ears.

Her audience loved the spiritual aspect of the show. "It doesn't matter which path you take to spirituality...what matters is that you seek a path." As the program changed, the listeners and their attitudes changed. "But it wasn't until my fifth trip to Israel in 1998, as part of a media tour, that it all jelled for me. We came to the outskirts of Jerusalem and I suddenly felt such a strong connection to the ancient city and its importance to the world. It enriched my soul. My fate was sealed and I finally understood what I came here to do. In that instant I realized that opportunities come our way all the time, either subtly or in your face. How we react to them and the choices we make determine who we become and whether or not we reach our potential. I

am fortunate to have found my true calling—my destiny. But it wasn't without pain, sacrifices and daily challenges. Sure I would have loved to have been married and had a family. I had opportunities, but something always stopped me."

Asked why Zelda remained at CHIN after having radio shows in Vancouver and Florida and her own television show for



eight years, she answers without a trace of regret. "I persevered with Jewish radio because I believe that this is where *Hashem (God) wants me to be. Having the freedom to challenge the status quo* in the Middle East, on university campuses and abroad is not possible in mainstream media."

A very large part of Zelda's audience is not Jewish. "They call in on a regular basis. Some are angry at my zealous pro-Israel stance, but most are interested in learning the truth that has been hidden or skewed for so long, and are grateful for my constant, consistent vocal presence. I want to inspire all my listeners to educate and challenge themselves, to be proud of their heritage and to stand up and be counted. It's a great show filled with segments on health, finance, world and local politics, entertainment and so much more. And it keeps evolving."

When asked how she consistently elicits such candid and hard-hitting inter-

views from her guests, Young responds: "I do the research, read the material and trust my instincts. My guests feel at ease because I am calm. They know that my goal is to have them speak from the heart to the heart."

Her list of guests would fill a journal. "I have been fortunate to learn from all of them." Interviewing Eli Wiesel was like talking to a friend. He was a great communicator, a very caring person and I felt a profound sense of joy having spoken with him. Deepak Chopra impacted my life because of his deep spirituality, which is evident in every aspect of his life. I have tremendous admiration for Joseph Farah, a Christian Arab, who despite threats to his life continues to dispel myths about Israel. He is cloaked in courage and integrity."

Zelda is a well-respected journalist. She reflects the heartbeat of the Jewish community both here and abroad. She has received many honors including Bnai Brith's prestigious League of Human Rights Media Award and the Canadian Ethnic Journalists' Award.

Zelda's mother lived in the shelter of Zelda's loving care until her death recently at the young age of 98. "Many taught me to love myself at every age, and so I loved her at every age. As a society we have to learn to see past age, frailties and disabilities."

Zelda's passion is giving voice to the truth and the Jewish people. Her trademark is honesty. Her life is about embarking on the journey, embracing the obstacles, learning from mistakes, caring for the elderly, the weak, the disabled, the downhearted, the animals...those whose voices can't be heard.

Sam's words—"in the final analysis you'll know the truth, and you'll have to live with it"—seem prophetic. He would definitely be proud of his daughter's choices.

For the past 25 years CHIN radio has brought Zelda to our homes 6 days a week, Monday to Friday 100.7 FM 11:00 to 12:00 noon and on Sundays 1540 AM 8:30 to 10:00 a.m.

**lifestyles**