

A pioneer in community pediatrics

• LISA SAMIN

It is rare to be able to follow your passions and weave them throughout your life. Basil Porter is one of the lucky people who has been able to do this with much success.

Porter and his brother grew up in Johannesburg, to parents of Lithuanian descent. Like most South African Jewish kids, he says, Porter thought that everyone had acres of land, a huge house with a swimming pool and at least three servants. He was active in the Jewish youth movement Habonim, which would play a central role in his life.

During his teen years, the tentacles of apartheid were strangling the country, and Porter explains, “My friends and I were pushed by apartheid to leave the country and pulled by our Zionist youth movement to go to Israel.”

First, he attended Wits Medical School in Johannesburg and graduated at the age of 23. He narrowly avoided serving in the South African army by pure luck; it was a random ballot and his number was not chosen.

At the time of his graduation, there was an internship program at what is now Sheba Medical Center in Tel Hashomer for South African medical-school graduates. “Dr. Chaim Sheba recognized the exceptional pool of talent, and recruited quite a number of South African doctors,” says Porter. It was here that Porter met his Israeli wife, Noga, who was a social worker, at a patient’s bedside.

Porter made aliyah in 1967, six months before the Six Day War. He figured he would try it and if it didn’t work out, he could always return to South Africa. He subsequently began his pediatric training in Ashkelon. Shortly thereafter, Porter was offered a residency position at the University of Chicago. “Although I barely knew where Chicago was,” laughs Porter, “my wife and I took the plunge and went.”

They remained in Chicago for three years, and it was there that Porter cemented his love for pediatrics. “From a very young age, I adored the company of children,” explains Porter. “I wanted to do everything I could to help them.”

Although staying in Chicago was tempting, Porter says that their love for Israel pulled him and his wife back. It was also the offer from the head of pediatrics in Beersheba, who told Porter that they were opening a new, community-oriented medical school in Beersheba, and that there was much work to be done. Porter and his wife took up the challenge, thinking it would only be for a few years. They ended up staying for 35.

“These were such exciting times,” remembers Porter. “The new medical school at Ben-Gurion University [of the Negev] was so completely different from the other medical schools and from what I had seen in Chicago. In fact, many of the doctors that I had worked with rarely treated a child. They worked on rare diseases in the lab.”

He dived into community pediatrics, a field he says, that has enormous potential. After a couple of years, he decided “to pack off to Ofakim” to develop community pediatric services and a teaching model for working with children from under resourced communities.

“My time in Ofakim, from 1973 to 1980, was the



BASIL PORTER, 74
FROM JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA
TO BEERSHEBA TO TEL AVIV

(Courtesy)

most formative seven years of my life,” he says. “There was so much demand for pediatric services and so much need for me to understand not just illness, but behavioral and development issues as well. It was exhilarating, but exhausting.”

In 1980, Porter received a Fellowship with the Department of Community Pediatrics in Boston. It was here that he learned to identify and deal with developmental and behavioral problems. “I saw so much of this in Ofakim, but I didn’t really know how to tackle these kinds of issues,” he remembers. “Issues that parents of small children deal with all the time, like incessant crying, bedwetting, delayed speech, autism and their own exhaustion and its effect on the family.”

Porter learned from some of the leading specialists in early child development. When he returned to Israel a year later he set up the Child Development Center at Soroka Medical Center in Beersheba. He was also a leading figure in developing community primary care services.

In 1993, Porter made a major move, leaving the hospital and becoming the Community Services director for the Maccabi HMO. With his appointment in 2009 as Maccabi’s national director of pediatrics, he and his wife moved to Tel Aviv. But his love of community pediatrics never waned.

Porter came full circle when an Australian colleague he had met in the early ’90s, Prof. Frank Oberklaid (now director of the Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children’s Hospital in Melbourne) and Israel’s leading pediatricians came together to try to figure out a way for Israel to move ahead in the field of community pediatrics. The group met for endless coffee, beer and intense discussions, culminating in dinner one night at the

Goshen restaurant in Old Jaffa.

When they decided to launch an organization to advance community pediatrics, they named it Goshen. It began with the support of the Pediatric Department at the Hadassah Medical Organization and Hadassah Australia, the Rashi Foundation and a major funder, and became an independent non-profit in 2014.

“Through Goshen we want to advance the health, development and well-being of Israel’s children, especially those from vulnerable communities,” says Porter. “We developed a year-long course to train pediatricians to work in the community, to recognize behavioral-development issues, and to play a stronger role in the child development ecosystem. Our website, *Ech Gadalta* (Growing Up) gives parents comprehensive information on child development.

“In addition,” he continues, “there are policy changes that need to be made in the health system and Goshen is taking the lead on this.”

Looking back, Porter says that there is a much greater understanding today of community pediatrics in Israel. “Years ago, we would never have found the head of a hospital pediatric department, like Hadassah’s Dr. Eitan Kerem, board chairman of Goshen, who wholeheartedly supports community pediatrics. But we all understand that there is so much more work to be done.”

With all his professional achievements, Porter is just as proud of his family. He has three grown children and eight grandchildren. The oldest is going into the army and the youngest is two.

“Believe it or not,” he laughs, “I still had time to hone my hobby of playing violin and viola in a string quartet with fellow physicians from Beersheba.” ■