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a lifestyles exclusive:

## **David Benton** **Mr. Hospitality**

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Photos courtesy of David G. Benton

# David G. Benton

## by Emanuel Weinstein *mr. hospitality*

**D**avid G. Benton, Vice President and General Manager of The Rittenhouse Hotel and Condominium Residences, is a strong advocate of the extraordinary Jewish compulsion to help those in need. This is best summarized in the dictum, "If you give me a fish, I will be fed today. If you teach me how to fish, I will never know hunger," the essence of the renowned 12th century scholar Reb Moshe ben Maimon's outline of the "eight levels of *tzedaka*. The greatest level, above which there is no other, is to strengthen the name of another Jew by giving him a present or loan, or making a partnership with him, or finding him a job in order to strengthen his hand until he need no longer [beg from] people. For it is said, You shall strengthen the stranger and the dweller in your midst and live with him, (Leviticus XXV:35) that is to say, strengthen him until he need no longer fall [upon the mercy of the community] or be in need."

Erudite, urbane, well spoken and impeccably dressed, Benton speaks fondly and with no small amount of pride that his parents, escapees to England from Hitler's European hell, are the cornerstones in the foundation of his Jewish sensibilities. While confessing to not being an observant Jew, David has more than enough soul of a Jew to be an example to his brothers and sisters in the faith. The academics and the fundamentalists can argue about his attachment to Torah, and they can debate his "Jewishness" until the proverbial cows come home, but it is primarily what is in David's heart that defines his approach to charity and service to his fellows who have not had his material good fortune.

Benton speaks about his early experiences working on Kibbutz K'Far Hanassi just prior to, and after, the Six Day War in 1967 as being elemental in developing his worldview regarding the value of each individual and his particular contribution toward the benefit of the whole. Those days of washing dishes, picking apples, sowing wheat, building irrigation systems, working in the chicken house, getting his hands dirty and calloused, as well as being shot at by machinegun-wielding Arab infiltrators, enabled him to see that labels and titles of position are mere fictions. Real worth comes from self-knowledge and from doing a job—any job—as best as one can.

Benton tells the story of a survivor who was given the task of working the chicken houses and hatcheries. This particular *kibbutznik* was so sure that he would not be able to carry out his functions because he "knew nothing from chickens."

On a kibbutz you don't really have much choice of a job if you wish to remain on the collective, so this gentlemen gritted his teeth and went about the business of learning how to deal with live chickens. After three months, the man was placed in charge of managing the resources of the hatcheries and all the commensurate needs of the section, such as ordering feed grain and what not.

"The lesson that really stuck with me was the fact that we all lived in exactly the same housing, wore exactly the same clothes. There was no monetary value to what the people were doing. They were doing it for the well-being of the community," explains Benton. In other words, anyone can have a title, but few can have a meaningful position without sacrificing something of one's self. Benton understood the true meaning of community; that a community needs leadership, but being a leader does not give you the right to denigrate others or feel superior. Each person in a community has a role to play. One of those roles is being the leader. Another role is delivering the mail, and another picking apples. Benton learned from his experience how each kibbutznik was recognized as having great value to the community, in whatever job he performed. He brings this same philosophy to his leadership role at The Rittenhouse Hotel.

Decades later, stationed in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, as an up-and-comer in hotel and restaurant management (in which he holds a B.S. from Cornell's Hotel School '71), his Israel experience enabled him to take a different perspective on labor/management relations. He watched both sectors in operation under his command and realized that the traditional hierarchy that kept ware washers and managers swinging in their own isolated orbits was not contributing to the efficient execution of duties. And neither was it contributing to any sense of teamwork. So, Benton asked himself: "Who is really important? Who is more important, a ware washer or a manager? They are both equally important," was—naturally—his conclusion. Relating this truth to the earlier insights gained on the

kibbutz, Benton remarks, "What I was left with is the idea of 'empowerment,' and the word did not even exist back then."

This truth, and his faith in the abilities of those he works with, helped Benton shape a philosophy that contains the idea of self-realization and charity which he cultivated into an ethic that has not only served him well as an international executive, but has earned him the respect and praise of those in his employ and in his community.



Photos courtesy of David C. Benton

Benton speaks of the family values he lived with as a young person in post-war England. His mother escaped from Meissen, a 13th century village about 30 kilometers outside of Dresden when she was 19 years old. The story goes that Benton's mother learned of the round-ups by the Gestapo and disguised herself as a Red Cross nurse by donning a child's play costume she acquired from a shop near the train station. She pretended to be an aid worker, and the police never asked her for identity papers. She boarded a train and fled to Holland. Not much later, she crossed the English Channel and ended up in a small shire outside of London, called East Grinstead, where the Jewish Agency placed her and the man who would become her future husband. There, the future couple went about picking up the

pieces of their lives by working hard in and around the East Grinstead community, contributing to the war effort and living a life not unlike those who would establish the *kibbutzim* in the new State of Israel.

However, growing up with the subcutaneous antisemitism of English schoolmates, Benton learned that he would rather be in the United States. Benton felt that he was never going to be able to climb the ladder to success there, saying he had "no chance as a Jew to rise through the ranks" if he were to remain in England.

Although the anti-Jewish sentiments and hostilities in England were not anywhere close to the magnitude of hate suffered on the European continent, Benton talks of the headmaster who for no other reason than because he was a Jew, held him back for a year at school. When asked the reason for this humiliation, the headmaster claimed Benton's performance was "not adequate." Confronted with the absurdity of this injustice, the headmaster "went into a tirade of ethnic slurs," recounts Benton. To Benton's credit, he did not become embittered by this event, but used it as a motivation to be "more than adequate" in his life's endeavors and to give something back to those who are also in the minority.

The Rittenhouse is a 98-room luxury boutique hotel overlooking Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia. It boasts award-winning restaurants, supervised by world-renowned chef Jean-Marie Lacroix. Jeremiah Tower, of Stars restaurant fame, recently stated in the *San Francisco Examiner*, "Lacroix at The Rittenhouse...is America's newest and best example of the definition of the old Michelin standard of 'worth the journey.'"

Amongst its accolades are such prestigious awards as the AAA Five Diamond for the last 12 years; *Conde Nast's* "The Gold List: Best Places to Stay in the World"; *Official Hotel Guide International's* Superior Deluxe Status; *International Travel Magazine's* 100 Best Hotels in the World, to name only several. There is also an impressive list of high-exposure folk who have stayed at the hotel, luminaries such as Colin Powell; President Gerald Ford; President George Bush, Sr.; His

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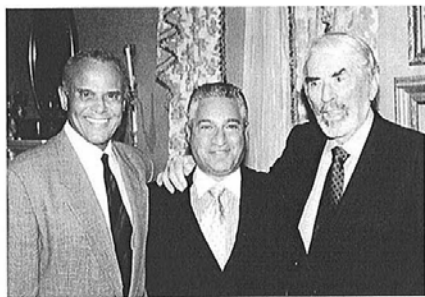
Royal Highness, Prince Andrew, Duke of York; Her Royal Highness, Princess Anne; Luciano Pavarotti; Tom Hanks; Bruce Willis, and Mel Gibson. This type of success on a consistent basis is a direct reflection on Benton and the people he has on his team.

Benton has developed his idea and ethic into a program that enables all his employees to learn to make decisions without being constrained by their position or officious managers. Benton stresses that it is necessary for growth and development to be trusted with decision-making power and to be recognized as an important and integral part of a larger organism.

Benton speaks of the illogic of those who, for example, would not trust and respect anyone except a specially trained factory mechanic to repair their \$300,000 Lamborghini, yet would pay little attention and show no respect to a person who operates a \$150,000 ware-washing machine, while cleaning and sanitizing thousands of dollars worth of fine china and crystal stemware on a daily basis.

Each morning he makes the rounds of the back-of-the-house departments and always stops to chat with the ware washers. Benton understands their worth and respects their ability.

**B**enton speaks with an endearing quality of self-effacing charm as he mentions his and his wife Ilyce's work with organizations in the Philadelphia area where he makes his home. The Bentons are extremely active in raising funds for institutions as diverse as the Boy Scouts, The Arthur Ashe Tennis Center, and the Academy of Vocal Arts, where full scholarships are awarded to promising young talent.



(l-r) Harry Belafonte, David Benton and Gregory Peck.

It is evident that Benton takes a particular pleasure in his involvement with WorkStream, a program at The Rittenhouse that is dedicated to assisting handicapped minorities acquire a level of self-reliance, self-esteem and mostly, self-respect. All of this is part and parcel to Benton's absolute belief in working with his people on a one-to-one basis and dealing with everyone as equals. The traditional hierarchies are tossed aside for the more pragmatic approach of recognizing the strengths of an individual and reinforcing



Henry Kissinger and David Benton.

them. Any weaknesses are sought out, and those tendencies are not placed where they could hold back the progress of a teammate.

Not long ago, Benton's mother returned to Meissen at the behest of the

village's burgermeister who wished to make a public apology for the events of the Holocaust and Meissen's loss of her Jews. Benton, who was at that time in Holland on business, ended up making the trip with his mother when his flight back home had been cancelled because of the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001.

While the events of that visit are not central to this narrative, it must be noted that Benton, as with other children of survivors, carries a distinct mark on him—a peculiar dynamic between survivor and next generation, the close contact with parents who went through hell and came back to rebuild their lives that make these children a declaration of the promise of the future.

Being the offspring of a survivor must have its difficulties, what with the gut-wrenching tales of loss and despair, pain and madness. But something else comes through—another aspect of the will to live and the will to never be beaten down nor defeated by any temporal enemy—somehow just that much more conscious of the need to be of service to one's fellow, to defend the weaker ones, to assist the struggling, to guide the lost, and to teach the hungry how to fish.

As such, it is important to mention that the tradition continues. Benton's eldest daughter, Melissa, after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania in 2002 as an Art History major, joined a program called the New York Fellows, where she is now teaching the second-grade in an under-resourced elementary school in the South Bronx. His youngest daughter, Samantha, is a junior at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania, majoring in Social Work. lifestyles