

Irving Schwartz

Contributed to The Globe and Mail

Published November 1, 2010 Updated 2 days ago

Humanitarian, workaholic, entrepreneur, officer of the Order of Canada, fiercely loyal Cape Bretoner. Born Aug. 17, 1929, in New Waterford, N.S. Died Sept. 18 in Sydney, N.S., of cancer, aged 81.

Irving Schwartz was the fourth of six children, all born in the Cape Breton coal-mining town of New Waterford, N.S. His father, Abraham Schwartz, died at 35, leaving his wife with five young children and pregnant with her sixth. With no business background, Rose Schwartz took over the management of her husband's retail store with 24 hours notice.

Under her leadership, that business grew and flourished, enabling her to send each of her children to university. Four of them worked in the store from childhood in various capacities. Irving said proudly that he was a graduate of The Rose Schwartz School of Business.

Irving began to take on responsibilities far beyond his years. When he was 15, Rose sent him to Toronto to buy furniture. He conceived the idea of buying an entire boxcar full and selling it directly from a New Waterford railroad siding. Friends and family warned Rose against such a foolhardy venture, but she insisted on letting him obey his impulse, saying, "If he succeeds, it will be wonderful. If he fails, he will have learned a lesson that will last him a lifetime." Irving sold every stick of furniture. Thus began his career as an entrepreneur.

He remained a visionary risk-taker throughout his life. Most of his business ventures were hugely successful, with one or two memorable exceptions. Irving and his younger brother Harold decided that New Waterford needed a laundromat, which local citizens dubbed "The Wishy-Washy." On the day of the grand opening, the town sewers backed up, leaving a dark stain on both the laundry and their reputations.

In 1958, Irving married Diana Usher of Montreal. They had four children, Margo, Joanne, David and Stephanie, and four grandchildren.

The diversity of Irving's business interests was mind-boggling, including retail stores, nursing homes, a cable-TV network and, most recently, a high-speed broadband Internet network for all of Cape Breton. He was the head of more than 30 companies during his career. Work was his only hobby. He held court every morning over breakfast at a local hotel, dispensing advice and making deals. Typically, throughout a rigorous course of chemotherapy and radiation, he never missed a single day in the office.

Irving's greatest legacy is his humanitarian work. He quietly helped many families survive hard times, with no expectation of recognition. His crowning contribution was his founding of the Canadian International Demining Corps, headquartered in Cape Breton and committed to removing land mines throughout the world. This was celebrated by his appointment to the Order of Canada in 1998. Untold numbers of men, women and children owe their lives to him.

By Richard Goldbloom, Irving's brother-in-law.

Source: The Globe and Mail <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/facts-and-arguments/irving-schwartz/article1241043/>