

PROFILE Michael and Marjorie Lipson

My Zoom interview with the Lipsons took place on a Sunday afternoon, with Michael and Marge some 2500 miles apart. Marge had recently flown back to Burlington from Tucson, Arizona where the couple have spent the past 16+ winters (with the exception of last year because of the pandemic). Michael was due to undertake the long drive home a few days later. He likes to drive, he says, and when he has a co-driver they enjoy a leisurely road trip. "I like seeing the country, visiting friends along the way, and making stops at interesting places, such as the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama; Memphis for some blues; Nashville for a variety of music and music history; and Washington, DC for the Holocaust Museum, among others. Driving alone this time, he planned to make the straight-through trip in about six days.

The Lipsons first visited Tucson 25 years ago and liked what they saw. They bought a house there in 2009 and have escaped Vermont winters during the harshest months. "We like the outdoors, biking, hiking, walking, golfing, and we enjoy Tucson's cultural events and festivals." A special favorite is the annual Festival of Books, which promotes and celebrates authors, reading and literacy, engaging over 100,000 people in lectures and programs regarding current events and literature during a weekend of events.

Michael lived in Danbury, Connecticut, though he spent his first 10 years in the Bronx. His grandparents on both sides emigrated from Poland and Russia. His maternal grandfather, a tailor who worked in the garment industry, arrived in NYC in 1903 and was one of the initial members of the ILGWU (the garment workers union); on his father's side his grandmother also came in the early 1900s, and then went by herself back to Russia to visit her family. His paternal grandfather was a retailer who, with his grandmother, owned an appetizer store on the Lower East Side, then a candy store in the Bronx, and later a liquor store, which he ran with Michael's father for many years. His mother started working at age 14 or 15 as a secretary in a fabrics firm in the garment district.

The family moved to Connecticut, where Michael says, "We lived in the 'country' just in front of a grassy hill separated from us with barbed wire, where cows grazed." His dad bought a cigar store (complete with a wooden Indian out front), sold newspapers, magazines, cigars, cigarettes, pipes and tobacco, and later candy and toys. After several years he went into sales, focusing in the medical devices and pharmaceutical areas. His mom worked for a prominent attorney, then became the head legal secretary for a larger firm in town. "She ended her career in the '70s when she and my dad retired and moved to West Palm Beach, Florida," Michael says.

In Danbury they were members of the United Jewish Center, a unique liberal congregation with a Sephardic rabbi named Jerome Malino, who insisted on traditional services on Shabbos and High Holy Days. Michael and his brother Charles attended not only Hebrew School, but also Sunday school for a time, where history was emphasized. They both celebrated their bar mitzvot and were confirmed. "I recall doing most of the Torah reading as well as my haftorah," Michael says. "There was a time then when I thought I might orient towards becoming a rabbi. That passed."

He and Charlie were educated in public schools in the Bronx and Danbury. During his teenage years Michael was very active in his youth group (NEFTY) and recalls going to conclaves, visiting

congregations in other states and engaging in deep conversations about Israel, antisemitism and related subjects. He graduated from the University of Connecticut in 1966 and George Washington University School of Law, with honors, in 1969. Admitted to the bar in DC, he served for a year as law clerk in the District of Columbia Court of Appeals, then, in 1970-'71 as staff attorney in the Neighborhood Legal Services Program. Subsequently he became a graduate fellow at Georgetown Law Center, earning an LL.M in a program in which he oversaw public interest litigation on behalf of consumer and environmental groups before federal agencies.

During his stint at Legal Services he met Marjorie, a native of Fond du Lac, WI. A 1969 graduate of the University of Wisconsin, she had ventured to DC with her college roommate. Having majored in Spanish and elementary education, Marge was teaching in a public school in Anacostia, in the southeastern part of the city. Later she taught in DC's first open space school in the northeast area. She and Michael were neighbors on the same block on Capitol Hill, "at a time when people could afford to live there," she says.

From 1972 to early 1974 Michael served as trial attorney with the Federal Trade Commission in the Special Projects division of the Bureau of Consumer Protection. After a couple of years Michael and Marge decided to take a break from their jobs and get away from the DC area. Marge was ready for a change and Michael was frustrated with the pace of government bureaucracy. To add to the mix, Washington was in the midst of building their Metro system and traffic was brutal. Longing for a change of scene, they took a six-month sojourn to Europe and North Africa. "You could do that for \$5.00 a day in 1974," Marge recalls.

Back in the States they were married on September 7, 1974 in a temple in DC that was housed in a church shared by that congregation. When Michael stepped into the position of Deputy Director of Vermont Legal Aid, they moved to Vermont, living first in South Hero, later in a circa-1852 farmhouse in Bristol, and finally in Holmes Road in South Burlington. Michael became a member of the Vermont bar in 1976.

Marge, unable to find a full-time teaching position in '74, took a job as a long-term substitute at H.O. Wheeler School (now the Integrated Arts Academy). She also earned her Master's degree in education at UVM and was subsequently hired as an instructor/lecturer in the UVM College of Education, where she worked in the renowned APEX program. Soon, however, she realized that she needed a doctorate if she wanted to continue do the work she envisioned as a university educator.

Although they loved it here, the Lipsons moved after four years to Ohio, where Michael became professor of law at the University of Toledo College of Law and Marge pursued her Ph.D. at the University of Michigan, just about an hour's drive north of Toledo. After finishing her doctoral program, she was hired as an assistant professor at Eastern Michigan University. "Vermont was still home for us, though," the couple said. "We came back just about every summer."

During her doctoral studies, Marge became interested in the impact of prior knowledge on reading comprehension and launched a study that involved young readers from different religious backgrounds. Some those young readers were attending a Hebrew Day School in Toledo, where Marge was later hired to work on the lay curriculum. Having grown up in a Methodist family in Wisconsin, she had not converted to Judaism, but the more she learned,

she says, the more she wanted to know. This led to studies with Rabbi Fishel Perlmutter, an influential Conservative rabbi at Congregation B’Nai Israel who was noted for promoting ordination for women. The Lipsons were involved in trying to adopt a baby at the time, Marge says, “and I felt I should know more to become a more informed parent.”

In 1982, they had the opportunity to return to Vermont when Marge was offered a visiting appointment at UVM and Michael was recruited to join Madeleine Kunin’s volunteer staff as she ran for the first time for Governor of Vermont against incumbent Governor Richard Snelling. They both took leaves of absence from their faculty positions, and – two days before moving back in June – learned that their baby had arrived. Little Nora Lipson became the ‘mascot’ of the Kunin campaign. “We ran a good race,” Michael says, “but it wasn’t successful.” When the election was over he did some project work for various lawyers around Burlington, including Samuelson, Portnow, Miller & Eggleston, and then became counsel to the new firm of Miller, Eggleston & Rosenberg (now Primmer Piper Eggleston & Cramer), which specialized in civil and administrative litigation.

After returning to Ohio in 1983 for two years, the Lipsons came back to Burlington for good in 1985. That spring they adopted their son, Theodore (Theo), through the Vermont Children’s Aid Society. “I like to say that we’ve been Vermonters for 47 years, with a detour to Ohio,” Michael quips. Marge worked as an associate professor at UVM in the College of Education and Social Services and Michael became a partner in Miller Eggleston. In 1990 he joined Green Mountain Power and later served as general counsel, where he remained for 10 years before opting for early retirement.

In the years that followed, he consulted with GMP and other Vermont utilities and was involved in a large and complex international arbitration in which the Vermont utility companies sought relief from contract obligations with Hydro Quebec. A few years later Michael was appointed as a part-time administrative law judge in the Office of Professional Regulation for the Vermont Secretary of State, whose mission is to protect the public from incompetent or unethical practitioners of various professions and occupations through a system of licensing and discipline.

Public service has always loomed large in Michael’s life. He was president of Vermont Legal Aid Board of Trustees and remained a member of the board for 10+ years; served as a member of the Howard Center Board of Trustees and on the Board of Maple Leaf Farm; and has been involved with COTS for over three decades, starting in the ‘90s and continuing today, including serving several different terms on the board. From 2004 to the present day, he has been involved in *pro bono* work and is now limited to that practice by his Vermont bar license.

During her time at UVM, Marge became a tenured full professor, co-founded the Vermont Reads Institute and enjoyed a long career as a scholar in the areas of reading (dis)ability, assessment and school change. Named a UVM University Scholar for her research on reading difficulties and comprehension in older students, she is a prolific writer, author or co-author of many scholarly papers, nine books, and numerous sets of teacher training materials. Translating research into practice, she has worked with school districts across the country to improve their literacy instruction, provided professional development for thousands of teachers, helped develop policy to guide school literacy programs, and supported international efforts to improve literacy in Ghana, Tanzania and the nation of Georgia. Now holding the title of

Professor Emerita, she is known both nationally and internationally for her research in the areas of reading and literacy and received recognition and many awards for teaching excellence.

Longtime members of Ohavi Zedek, Michael and Marge enrolled their children in Hebrew School and celebrated their bat and bar mitzvot here. Nora currently lives in Beverly, MA, where she and her husband are teachers and the parents of a 7-year-old son. Theo is a musician and father of two daughters, now 11 and 15, who are living in Burlington. Michael served as a member and vice chair of the synagogue's Board of Directors and as co-president with David Pasackow in the late '80s. He was responsible for negotiating Rabbi Joshua's long-term contract.

His focus is now on the Lost Shul Mural. Having first seen the mural in its original location on Hyde Street once the walls that had been erected in front of it were removed, Michael was very taken with it, not only as a religious object, but also as a phenomenal example of folk art. Approached by Governor Kunin to join the board of the Lost Mural, he did so in the fall of 2020. "Since that time, I have been an enthusiastic participant in fundraising and oversight of the cleaning and restoration phases, supporting the creation of contracts and budgets for cleaning, restoration and related tasks, and working on the overall formalities required of a nonprofit corporation. I became one of the Lost Mural Project's vice presidents this year."

The Lipsons are generous supporters of this effort, and they look forward to celebrating the completion of the restoration and to the educational programming that will follow. Michael says, "My hope in the future is that the Lost Mural will serve as a symbol in this community of Vermont's wealth of immigrants, their contributions to Vermont's character, and their cultural and artistic expressions."

~ Judy Hershberg
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Winter 2022: Michael, daughter Nora and grandson Asher on a trail ride in Tucson