

# Leonard J. Asper

## leading the way

by Aliza Davidovitch

If eyes are the windows to the soul, then one can't help but feel like a Peeping Tom when looking into Leonard Asper's inviting, intense, clear blue eyes. His eyes are uniquely engaging, but they are also unyielding. They make it difficult to tell whether you have reached his personal inner sanctum or hardly made it past the door. They are similar to the keen, confident eyes of his father, Izzy Asper, without the testament of struggle and time.

It is not only Leonard Asper's eyes that show he is his father's son, but also his drive and determination. In 1999, Leonard Asper became President and CEO of CanWest Global Communications Corp., assuming a role his father held for 25 years before stepping down to become executive chairman. Israel Asper stepped down in 1997 and the longtime company executive, Peter Viner served as CEO until Leonard was ready to assume the mantle. It is a position the 38-year-old Leonard, earned, not one he inherited.

Leonard joined CanWest in 1991 as associate general counsel for the company's Global TV station in Ontario. Thereafter, he also held various positions in corporate development at CanWest Global and ultimately was appointed COO and then CEO.



Photo by Gordon Lewis

**“If I said where I thought we could be in the next five, ten, 25 years... [they] would send people in white jackets to take me away to a room with padded walls. But at CanWest we reach for the stars, and nothing is impossible....”**

Leonard, interestingly, is the youngest of three siblings, all who hold substantial positions in the company their father began a quarter of a century ago. Each has proved him/herself by succeeding on foreign testing ground before joining CanWest.

When it comes to business, Leonard says he is just like his father. “My father and I share the same philosophical approach and tend to agree on most things,” he tells *Lifestyles*. But that does not preclude differences of opinion and vigorous boardroom debates, a process Leonard deems as the best and healthiest way for good decisions to be made.

The entire Asper family and the shareholders feel very comfortable with the youngest Asper at the helm. Even Leonard's older brother David and sister Gail did not vie for the spot. “There are certain things that go with being a CEO that I'm more comfortable with than they are,” says Leonard, who holds his sister and brother in the highest regard. “My brother has a brilliant marketing brain. He's a fireball when he takes on a project and always gets things done.” But according to Leonard, the eldest Asper son had no interest in getting involved in the day-to-day grind that goes along with being a CEO. He says that Gail, who is also extremely smart, didn't want the hours and travel that the top position entailed.

Asper heads one of Canada's most important companies. He was named CEO of the year by *Playback* magazine in 2001 and is a recipient of the 2002 Top 40 Under 40 award. During his tenure, the company has doubled in size and has become Canada's largest publisher of daily newspapers. CanWest Global Communications

Corporation owns seven networks and dozens of TV stations. Global Television Network alone broadcasts over the air via 11 television stations and is licensed in eight provinces, reaching 94% of English-speaking Canada. CanWest also owns other networks in New Zealand, Ireland and Australia. The company owns 11 major English daily newspapers in Canada such as *The National Post*, *Montreal Gazette*, *Ottawa Citizen*, to name a few, in addition to over 60 smaller publications. It also has interests in film production, the Internet and radio. It has over 11,000 employees.

Leonard Asper is the one responsible for pushing the company forward by engaging it in the entertainment industry and cyberspace. Asper's father was once noted as saying that as long as he was chairman of the company there would be no Internet deals. But Leonard, perhaps because of the generation gap, better understood the power of the Internet. Eventually he persuaded his father to change his mind. Today, the 70-year-old Israel Asper is quite an Internet addict himself. In fact, his son David tells how his workaholic father was delighted to find that through the Internet he could do business in three continents at the same time. Nevertheless, Leonard says that the role of the Internet in his company is still being defined, and that that aspect of the media business must be characterized as a work in progress.

**W**ith Israel Asper stepping aside, many would say that Leonard has big shoes to fill. But, luckily, Leonard is quite comfortable in his own shoes, for he has taken the lead

during fast changing times which will keep him dancing as fast as he can.

Leonard philosophizes by quoting a Rudyard Kipling poem: “If you can keep your head while all around are losing theirs...you'll be a man my son.” Leonard points out the satirical corollary to that quote by adding, “If you can keep your head while all around are losing theirs, you may not understand the seriousness of the situation.”

When *Lifestyles* met with Asper, he most certainly had his head on his shoulders, but with a mind that is going places. “If I said where I thought we could be in the next five, ten, 25 years... [they] would send people in white jackets to take me away to a room with padded walls,” Asper wrote in the company's 25 year retrospective *From Winnipeg to the World*. He continues, “But at CanWest we reach for the stars, and nothing is impossible....”

If Asper has high-reaching ambitions, it is because of his upbringing, he says. His parents have always encouraged him and his siblings to define goals which are achievable but are a big stretch. “Reach for the stars,” Leonard advises “in order to get the moon.”

The young CEO also grew up in a home in which excellence was demanded. “My parents always said that no matter what you're going to do, be the best at it, or try to be the best at it,” Asper tells. “That is one of the things that drive me most.”

As the youngest in his family, it is little wonder that Asper is wise beyond his years. He learned from everyone else's blunders.

“While growing up, my brother and sister took a lot of heat throughout the years and I learned from their mistakes,”

## “Nothing in life comes for free.

You must earn whatever you get, and once you get it, you've got to give back. That is the circle of life, and that is what I will pass on to my own children.”

Asper relates with an amused smile. “I figured my brother tried A, my sister tried B, and it didn't work. So I'll try C because I know that works.” His older brother, David, jokes that he did indeed set an example for his younger brother, an example of what not to do.

But Leonard seems to be a natural-born leader. When he was just in grade 10 he was the vice president of his B'nai Brith Youth Organization; in grade 11, he was president; and in grade 12 he was president emeritus. In those roles he would organize religious, sports and co-ed programs. The year he was president, his group won in the regional convention competition.

Asper says that somehow whatever he got involved in throughout the years he ended up being president. “People always would come up to me and say, ‘Len, you do it,’” Asper says. People seemed to recognize leadership qualities in him. Asper adds that he loves being with people and is enamored of the whole experience of setting out to do something and doing it.

Even if his leadership skills come easy, Asper is continually honing them. He unabashedly admits to continually studying the principals of good leadership, as he feels the stakes are very high. He says that there are 10 to 12 great leadership principles. He cites a few of them for *Lifestyles*: One, lead by example; two, add levity and celebrate success; three, engage people on a one-to-one basis; four, empower people and give them decision-making ability; five, make the company objective and vision clear to everyone.

The vision that Leonard and his family have for the company is one and united. They want CanWest Global

Communication Corp. to be the most profitable and meaningful company in the world. “The word ‘meaningful’ means a lot,” Asper states. “Being part of the community is very important. When the final chapter is written we want it to say that not only did we have huge corporate success, but we also had huge human success.”

**Y**et despite Leonard's own personal success today, he wasn't always sure what he wanted to be. The youngest Asper, named after his paternal grandfather, was born in Winnipeg Canada in 1964. As a young man he always wanted to be a pro-hockey player. His idol was David Keon of the Toronto Maple Leafs. His parents, however, kept his hockey aspirations on ice while they equipped him with other life skills. For one, he wasn't allowed to go out and hit the puck until he practiced his piano for one hour every day, a rule he is very grateful for today. He can sit with great ease at the piano and play whatever he chooses, even Guns 'N Roses, quite a departure from the classical music his grandparents revered. His parents also encouraged him to go to law school, an education Israel Asper thinks is unparalleled. It was an interesting choice of professions for the little boy who used to forget what he had to say when it was his turn to talk at the family dinner table.

So Leonard Asper headed off to Brandeis University where he received his BA and then graduated from the University of Toronto Law School in 1989. He especially loved studying Constitutional Law, which he says really prepares one for business. Asper admits that studying at Boston and in Toronto really helped his self-esteem and gave him absolute confidence

as a person. “I was completely anonymous there and any success I had, I achieved on my own as Leonard, and not Israel Asper's son,” he shares.

While at Brandeis, Asper not only found himself, but also got reacquainted with his Jewish studies, taking several courses on Middle East affairs. As a young boy, his father encouraged him to learn about his Jewish history. In grade 7 he was already reading books like *White Nights* and *The Revolt*, both books about the life of Menachem Begin.

Today, he, like his family, is a strong advocate of the State of Israel and takes on Israel's detractors with pride. He has recently begun taking on public speaking engagements and attempts to further Israel's case and also promote Jewish pride and pride for Israel. He is extremely bothered by the media's bias and unfair reporting toward the Jewish homeland.

Asper says that sometime in the future he would also like to study the Talmud, which he feels teaches very important and all encompassing lessons on how to live life.

But it seems that Leonard Asper, husband and father of three, is already living much of his life in the way of rabbinic teachings; for he has had his own share of morally strong teachers: his parents. He says that what was passed down to him already was the core value of integrity, discipline and the basic rule that you are what your reputation is and you have to stand for something.

“Nothing in life comes for free,” Leonard Asper says. “You must earn whatever you get, and once you get it, you've got to give back. That is the circle of life, and that is what I will pass on to my own children.”

*Byron Lee*