

Jewish News meets... David Dangoor / Special Report

‘My dad believed that what he gave, he kept’

Iraqi-Jewish businessman and benefactor Sir Naim Dangoor ploughed millions into helping others, including an inner-city school. Son David continues the tradition. *By Stephen Oryszczuk*

Shortly before lockdown, Year 11 and 12 science students in one of London's toughest neighbourhoods emerged from an auditorium, having just peppered a Nobel Prize winner with questions.

They wanted to know about cells, how they grow and divide. They asked about genes and their role in evolution by natural selection. They probed on the chemical elements of life. And they drilled down on the organising system of biology.

These curious souls were students at Westminster Academy (WA) in inner city London, where more than 90 percent of pupils come from a black, Asian or ethnic minority background, and they were speaking to Sir Paul Nurse in the Naim Dangoor Auditorium, part of the Dangoor Centre for Medical Education.

Smart, intelligent, often from poor and diverse family backgrounds, these children are far from pity cases, as the Jewish philanthropic Dangoor family can attest. Their support has been crucial, and it is appreciated.

“No one will be remembered as much as Sir Naim in our constituency,” says WA’s pin-sharp Muslim principal, Dr Saima Rana. “His legacy is just unbelievable.”

WA educates children from mostly refugee and immigrant families from infamous gang-warfare estates such as Mozart, Warwick and Lisson Green, which is exactly the reason Naim first showed an interest.

Postcode wars, gang warfare, violence, drugs, domestic abuse, alcoholism and a sudden influx of immigrants into the UK created “the perfect storm” several years ago, says Rana.

“The first few years were awful, 17 percent of GCSEs graded A to C. It just didn’t have the infrastructure.”

Naim stepped in to sponsor it and, for the past 14 years, his son, David, and David’s wife, Judy, have been committing half a day a week.

“Being in a poor area, with a big immigrant population, I think that was important to Sir Naim, having come here from Iraq as a Jewish refugee himself,” she says.

The family’s backing, through Dangoor Education, for the 1,100 student school has made all the difference, says Rana, describing how David and Judy are “eyes-on but hands-off, incredibly trusting of what I and my senior team are doing”.

No wonder. WA pupils now achieve 75 percent grades A*-C, and last year beat the world average for the international baccalaureate – all with the same constituency, where almost 90 percent of pupils come from an ethnic or religious minority. “We could have gentrified our community like others have, but we said no,” says Rana.

More importantly, WA is the only sec-



Naim, David and Judy Dangoor at Westminster Academy's 'topping out' ceremony in 2006

ondary school in London to offer every pupil week-long outdoor adventurous residential trips, either fully or part-funded by Dangoor. These children “never get to leave their borough, let alone the region”, she says.

“What David Dangoor does is move things around quietly in the background, so things happen for us. For example, if we want great teachers from outside London, he’ll work with Teach First to get us subsidised accommodation so they can afford to come here. People just don’t do that.”

She lists reams of other examples of his interventions, such as when he hired lawyers and others to push the government to cough up what it owed WA, and she beams.

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“He was ruthless. We were rightfully owed that money. He went all guns blazing and got it. Our community will never know what this man has done, but I’ll know. And we’re not



David and Judy Dangoor



talking small change here. This is big money to give the children opportunities and access to the world. As a result, they’re inspired.”

What is that special Dangoor-WA connection, I ask? She thinks it may have something to do with children who have been displaced, since David also had to leave the Iraq he loved as a child, first spending a year in Lebanon aged 10 before coming to the UK, where his father, Sir Naim Dangoor, was rebuilding the family business.

It certainly has a bearing. “My dad’s philosophy was formed by losing everything in Iraq in the ‘60s,” says David, via an hour-long Zoom call, recalling how Naim’s interests included a furniture factory, a Coca-Cola concession, a dry cleaning company, a match-making factory and a property development firm.

“He was doing very well. Then he had to choose between the money he’d built up and his freedom. He chose freedom, and said it was the best bargain he ever made.”

Money was in short supply as Naim rebuilt, but “by then he had a new view of material wealth”, explains David. “He saw it as a useful tool. He always said money was a good servant but a bad master. I’m careful to remember that.”

Sir Naim Dangoor’s experience led to wisdom. “He’d say ‘what I saved I lost, what I spent I enjoyed, and what I gave I kept’... and there is some truth to that. People still remember what he did to benefit others. Our world is built on co-operation. A great human strength is that, deep down, most of us derive pleasure from helping others.”