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Tucson philanthropist and developer Don Diamond dies at 91

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Donald R. Diamond

The Tucson Jewish community mourns the loss of local philanthropist, businessman, and real estate developer Donald R. Diamond, who died March 25 at the age of 91.

His daughter Rabbi Jennifer Diamond and Cantor Janece E. Cohen conducted funeral services March 27 at the Tucson Jewish Community Center. Rabbi Diamond opened the ceremony with a light remark: "Father couldn't afford an outside rabbi, so we're doing this all in house," she said, as she gestured around the J's packed ballroom. Among many other leadership roles, Mr. Diamond chaired the committee for the J's new building, which opened its doors in 1989.

Born in New York to Nathan and Sylvia Brooks Diamond, Mr. Diamond first arrived in Tucson as a student at Brandes Boarding School in the early '40s. He was confirmed

at Temple Emanu-El, which was then located on Stone Avenue. After service in the army in World War II, he attended the University of Arizona and was active in the Zeta Beta Tau Jewish fraternity. It was at the UA that he met Joan Brown from Des Moines, Iowa. They married Nov. 29, 1952. Joan died in 2016.

At the age of 37, Mr. Diamond retired from a successful career as a Wall Street commodities trader. With Joan and their three daughters, he moved from New York to Tucson in 1965, becoming involved in land development and entrepreneurship, as well as community causes. He told the AJP in a 2006 interview, "within a week, I was engrossed in Jewishness." He supported Temple Emanu-El, where he remained a member, and later also joined Congregation Or Chadash. He was involved in numerous local economic development, leadership, and social service organizations in the Jewish community throughout his life.

He served as head of the Combined Jewish Appeal in 1971 and was president of the Jewish Community Council (now Jewish Federation of Southern Arizona) from May 1974 to May 1976.

"Donald was a magnetic personality who drew people around him. It wasn't just that he was an influential in the community, it was that he connected with people on a personal basis, and so that combination of qualities made him a very powerful force for good when it came to community work," says JFSA president and CEO Stuart Mellan. "He was someone who was willing to take the lead and to ask others to join. As a result, whenever something was contemplated to benefit our Jewish community, he was our first call."

The Diamonds hosted the first major fundraising dinner for the Federation, Mellan says. In 2011, JFSA named that annual campaign effort the "Joan and Donald Diamond Lead Gifts Event." With Paul Baker, Mr. Diamond established the Men's Next Gen group to cement ties between Jewish leaders and mentor young community leaders.

"Our community was truly blessed to have such an outstanding role model, extraordinary visionary, and deeply committed volunteer leader shape Tucson and the Jewish community," says Graham Hoffman, president and CEO of the Jewish Community Foundation of Southern Arizona. "He and the entire Diamond family have been pioneers in supporting and sustaining countless Tucson organizations including JCFSA and JFSA."



Donald Diamond and Jewish Federation of Southern Arizona President and CEO Stuart Mellan at the Western Wall in Jerusalem during a Men's Next Gen trip in January 2005.

Todd Rockoff, president and CEO of the Tucson Jewish Community Center, recalls that after his first meeting with Mr. Diamond, "I walked away with a feeling as if I had just been with an old friend. We kibbitzed, laughed, envisioned a bright future, challenged each other and just really connected.

"It is a source of great pride that the [Tucson J] building bears the name Diamond Family Building," he says.

Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey described Mr. Diamond as genuine, generous and respected by all. "Don — possibly more than anyone else — helped develop Arizona's metropolitan areas into the growing cities they are today."

Mr. Diamond was among the largest private landowners in Pima County. Notable acquisitions included the 5,000-acre Rocking "K" Ranch, one of Tucson's largest master-planned developments; 12,700 acres of the Howard Hughes Estate; and The Canyons, a 160-acre, luxury community in the Catalina Foothills. Until his death, he continued as chair of his company, which encompasses residential, industrial and commercial projects across the United States and Mexico.

With Paul and Alice Baker, he purchased Old Pueblo Traders direct-mail retailer in the 1970s. Mr. Diamond was one of a group of original franchise owners of the Phoenix Suns and a general partner of the Arizona Diamondbacks. He owned KVOA-TV 4, the NBC affiliate in Tucson, from 1971 to 1983. With partners, Mr. Diamond bought the lease in 1984 for the county-owned Old Tucson Studios.

In 1988, Mr. Diamond established Diamond Ventures to expand real estate acquisitions and add management and strategic guidance resources to his portfolio. "Don went out of our way to know about our families," says David Goldstein, president of Diamond Ventures for the past 30 years. "He loved the company and treated everyone like family. He had a knack for getting the best out of people and he was proud of how the company conducted itself morally and ethically."

Mr. Diamond gave generously of his time and resources in local, national and international ventures. In 1973, he served as chair of the United Way, running its general campaign, and in 1995 was the first chairperson of the United Way of Tucson's Alexsis de Tocqueville Society. He sat on the board of directors of the Rincon Institute and the Sunstone Support Society Foundation of Southern Arizona. Mr. Diamond was the national co-chairman of the finance committee for Sen. John McCain's 2008 presidential run.

Mr. Diamond was named an honorary life member of the National Law Center for Inter-American Free Trade for fostering U.S. business with Mexico and was presented an honorary humane letters doctorate from the UA for his continued support.

As a UA alumnus, Mr. Diamond was a member of National Board of Advisors for the university's Eller College of Business and Public Administration and a supporter of the Arizona Center for Judaic Studies. He helped fund McKale Memorial Center renovations. With Joan, he received the UA Alumni Achievement Award in 2011.

For more than four decades, the Diamonds played a major role in supporting hundreds of Tucson's health, education and charitable service organizations. The Diamonds supported the UA Steele Children's Research Center; their interest in children's health care, particularly research on pediatric lung disease, stemmed from the death of their daughter Deanne at age 14 due to asthma complications. Mr. Diamond and Joan provided the lead gift for the Diamond Children's Medical Center at the University Medical Center, which opened in 2010. "He was interested in business, politics, beautiful women, deep sea fishing and big parties that celebrated him," says his daughter Helaine Levy. Struggling with health issues over the last year, he wanted to die in the home he called his castle, she says, but died at Diamond Children's Hospital.

Each of Mr. Diamond's grandchildren eulogized him with fond praise. Nathan Levy spoke about their connection to history and remembered a road trip to Tucson. Gabby Levy attributed her love of fashion to his "affliction for patterns" and his kitsch wardrobe. Carly Levy said her love for sports and the sports business came from her grandfather. She sang "They Can't Take That Away From Me," as she had at her grandparents' 60th wedding anniversary.

Survivors include his daughters, Helaine Levy of Tucson and Rabbi Jennifer Diamond of Sun Valley, Idaho; grandchildren, Nathan Levy of Denver, Carly Levy of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and Gabby Levy of New Orleans; and his sister Joyce Eskwitt of New York, New York. Interment was at Evergreen Cemetery.