

Monthly Profile: This month we feature Harris Estroff. Thanks Harris for sharing your story with us! Read other profiles at: <https://templemanuelakeland.com/member-profiles/>



Harris—about age 5

I am proud to be a native Lakelander since my birth in 1942. After graduating from Lakeland High School I attended the University of Texas from 1960 to 1965 and graduated with a B.B.A. in Marketing. In 1965 I moved to Atlanta, Georgia where I worked until returning to Lakeland in 1974. My first real job in Atlanta was with United Parcel Service when they first opened up in Georgia. I worked in personnel, customer service and managed the delivery information department. I also helped recruit new employees in Mississippi when UPS opened up in that state. While living in Atlanta, I joined the Army Reserves which led to six months of boot camp and active duty at Fort Benning, Georgia and then I was a monthly weekend warrior at the Atlanta Armory. I was in charge of securing Krispy Kreme doughnuts for the troops at the armory each weekend for them to munch on with the homemade coffee that was served. I was cross trained at peeling potatoes and clean up. I served two weeks per summer in a hospital unit at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina for six years between 1965 and 1971. I

did not like it but I believe that I learned a lot from that experience. In 1974 Linda and I married and we returned to Lakeland to begin my career as a merchant and eventual owner of my father's men's store, Nathan's.

I have an older sister, Gail Richman, who grew up in Lakeland but now lives in South Miami. Her husband, Jerry, was a tax attorney in Miami but he passed away about twenty years ago. Gail has two sons, Shane who lives in Portland, Oregon and Scott who lives in the Boca Raton, Florida area.

My dad was Nathan Estroff and my mom was Mildred Simovitz Estroff. They both passed away between 1995 and 1997. My grandpa Harris (my namesake) Estroff emigrated from Russia in the early 1900s and somehow wound up as a resident of Savannah, Georgia. I don't know much about him or my grandma on the Estroff side because they passed away before I was born. However, I do know that my grandpa was trying to avoid being recruited into the Russian army when he came to America.

He was a peddler who moved around from Savannah to smaller towns in south Georgia and on down to the Lakeland/Plant City area in Florida. His oldest son Sam Estroff settled in Lakeland before Grandpa Harris moved there and Sam got into the retail ladies' clothing business by opening up the Empire Store in the early 1930s. Grandpa Harris arrived in Lakeland in the mid 1930s and was in and out of some retail outlet stores himself, although I am not sure where they were located. He also was involved with the founding of Lakeland's Temple Emanuel as his signature is on the original charter.

My dad, Nathan, arrived on a train from Savannah to Lakeland in the late 1930s and began his career as a merchant by first working for his brother Sam at the Empire Store for a year or two and then branched out to begin his own men's store in the fall of 1941. The store was successful and specialized in men's suits and sportswear as well as a boy's department and a boy scout department and lots of one on one customer service.

My dad was also a signer of the original Temple Emanuel charter that is displayed in the upper rotunda at Temple Emanuel. One other thing I wish to mention is that the Empire Store started by Sam Estroff was later handed down to Melvin and Selig Estroff, Sam's sons, who built up the ladies' clothing business that eventually boasted five locations in shopping centers in Lakeland, Tampa and St. Petersburg. Mel and Selig both served our country in World War II before returning to the Empire Stores. They also both helped to grow the foundation of Temple Emanuel.

My mom, Mildred Simovitz Estroff was born to Olga and Solomon Simovitz. She had two brothers, Louie and Willie and one sister, Tillie. My mom's father and mother were Romanian Jews and immigrated through Ellis Island in New York. They were sent from New York to Key West for a short time before moving to Tampa. They spoke little or no English when they arrived in Tampa but they were fast learners and wasted no time in finding work and starting their family of four children.

I did not know my mom's siblings well although we visited them almost every Sunday as we grew up. We lived in Lakeland and they lived in Tampa but it was a very close knit family so we had fun at their house with our cousins in Tampa. I was a little afraid of Grandpa Solomon because he spoke broken English and always looked so serious. However, I vividly remember the advice he always gave me when he spoke to me.. "always look for a steel bridge to cross as you travel through life and avoid the paper bridges you may find". That advice was easy to follow for I have not yet laid eyes on a paper bridge to test out.

Grandpa passed away long before the Sunshine Skyway tragedy, but I often wonder what he would have thought about that. Grandpa Solomon was a very successful merchant. He opened Louie's Department Store in the early 1920s in Ybor City. His store was in a prime location and his children all became crackerjack sales people helping him out. In addition, he sponsored lots of immigrants from Romania and gave them jobs at his department store as well as loaning them money to help them assimilate in their new environment. In one notable case he sponsored a fellow that worked for him a few years who then decided he wanted his own store, quit grandpa's and bought from the same vendors and created a price war with grandpa's store by undercutting prices on popular items. They became fierce competitors and the story goes that they were going to have a fist fight in front of the stores at high noon one day. The scene was set but I have not been able to find out who won that fight. I can't blame gramps for being fighting mad.

One more story about Grandpa Solomon is that during the Great Depression (1929) many people who relied on the banks went broke, but not Solomon. He did not trust the bankers and he kept lots of cash in the mattress of his bed and he never went belly up during hard times!



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What was my childhood like? I have always felt like I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth. A sheltered childhood for sure. My mom and dad both worked during most of my early years. I recall always wanting responsibility or chores to do as a kid. I wanted to help our yardman Oscar mow the lawn with the push mower. However, I think mom was afraid to see me sweat, so I never got to help poor Oscar out. Come to think of it, I never did mow the lawn, then nor now. I've never even owned a lawnmower.

I loved Roy Rogers and used to wear a cowboy suit whenever possible. I had my own tricycle and the nursery school was three blocks away with traffic on Florida Avenue. I vaguely remember one day wearing my cowboy outfit and mounting my tricycle (Trigger) and going to the nursery school. There may have been a posse of some sort following me, but I made it to school somehow. 1947 was a long time ago so there is some vagueness to this "true" story.

Where did I go to school/degrees? After graduating from Lakeland High School I went to the University of Texas in Austin where I was a member of Sigma Alpha Mu Fraternity and graduated with a B.B.A. degree in Marketing.

My occupation for the past 46 years was a menswear merchant at Nathan's Men's Store, full time since 1974 and retiring in 2020. I worked there part time during high school.

How did Linda and I meet?

We were both living at nearby apartment complexes in Atlanta and may have crossed paths at parties, but did not really notice each other until we met on a double date where Linda had a date with a friend of mine. I got in touch with Linda a few days later... we have been married 47 years with lots of dividends and fond memories. We have three grown children – son Kevin with kids Jake and Max; son Greg who is a single eligible bachelor; and daughter Erica Estroff Woodruff who with husband Adam has four children – Lyla, Kyle, Brad and Hally.



What is the most interesting or unusual job I have ever had? The hardest, most exerting and unusual job I ever had was the summer of 1961 when I worked for Al and Donald Kaplan at Midstate Meat Packers division of Kaplan Industries. The job consisted of some office work as well as writing down the weights of fronts and hinds of the cattle after slaughter, working in and out of a freezer, going to cattle auctions, helping load trucks etc. Being family, I got special treatment, but not special enough for I was only able to last one month. The pay was good but I had to be there by 6:30 a.m., the odor was awful, watching the poor beasts meet their waterloo was depressing, and I wasn't desperate enough to last another day. I did learn a valuable lesson as to what hard, physical work is all about and why I should pursue an alternative vocation. I will never set foot in a slaughterhouse again.

What are my interests and hobbies.. what books have I read? I've been officially retired for about six months and so far it has been mostly good but adjusting to it can be frustrating. It is definitely an abrupt change of pace that is taking time to accept. The pandemic has added to the frustration since alternative choices are limited. Anyway, I do have lots of spare time and I am filling blank time slots slowly but surely. As for reading, I have never been an avid reader but I just finished reading Jerry Seinfeld's book Is This Anything? It was quite funny, if you like Seinfeld. I am now reading American Desperado by Jon Roberts and Evan Wright an interesting but very graphic non-fiction book.

On Being Jewish: I have been and my family have been members of Temple Emanuel since its beginning on Patterson Street and then to the building on Lake Hollingsworth since it was built. My dad, Nathan, and grandfather Harris were both signers of the original charter. I have served on the Board of Directors for many years, as school board chairman and on the House and Grounds and Honorial and Memorial committees.

My Jewish roots originated in Lakeland but I owe a lot to Camp Blue Star in North Carolina. I went to Blue Star every summer as a camper and staff member for 14 summers between 1950 and 1963 and I still love it dearly. While learning about my religion in an atmosphere filled with Jewish friends and the beauty of nature I formed lifelong friendships and a special pride for being Jewish. My children and grandchildren have followed me to Blue Star and have enjoyed the amenities and comradery found there.

The camp has changed a great deal over the years but the Blue Star spirit is still there and I highly recommend it for Jewish children, especially for those from small towns with limited exposure to Jewish ties. One summer (around 1955) we had a total of 13 Estroff children, (all cousins) at camp. All from Georgia and Florida. That is where we got to know those cousins fairly well.

What does being Jewish mean to me? When I hear the line about Jews are G-d's chosen people, I tend to believe it. Our religion, in my eyes, is by far the most logical religion on earth. It does not rely on mysticism, miracles, or fear to recruit or retain beliefs. Faith in a hereafter is not essential to why we strive to do the right thing. We have a direct line to our creator and our creator quietly communicates with our ever present conscience!

Who has been the biggest influence on your life and why? Both my mom and dad because they represented to me the kind of love and support that only a parent can offer. They may have overdone it from time to time, but having the confidence that they would always be in my corner, always stand up for me, and always love me no matter what, provided me with a lot of incentive to seek success. In their eyes I could do no wrong.

What is the one thing people would be surprised to learn about me? I am afraid of Ferris wheels and I really like riding in helicopters.

What is your proudest moment? I graduated from the University of Texas in 1965 and so did my daughter Erica in 2005. That weekend of her graduation was spectacular and I was so very proud of her. We both went there not knowing anyone else that would be there before school started. We both love the University of Texas and I was ecstatic that she loved being a Longhorn almost as much as I did. As it turned out, Erica and I went to the same grammar school, same junior high school, same high school and the same university and we both had our Bar/Bat Mitzvahs and were confirmed at Lakeland's Temple Emanuel. The weekend of her Texas graduation we flew to Austin with an entourage that included Jane and Brian Renz and Linda's brother and sister-in-law. The graduation included an astronaut who spoke, lots of fireworks from the University tower and great entertainment in Austin's music district. WHAT A GREAT WEEKEND!

Is there anything I would do over if I had the chance? Regrets, I've had a few, but we can save them for another day.



Top Left: Harris at the store in 2020.

Top Right: Mom and Dad, Mildred and Nathan Estroff, undated.

Below: as Nathan's Men's Store closed after 38 years, Harris was presented with a Key to the city by Mayor Mutz. Also shown are some of Harris's amazing staff!





Top Left : Dad Nathan, undated



Top Right: Mom, Mildred, with sister Gail and Harris, June 25, 1946

Bottom Right: Grandpa Solomon and Grandma Olga Simovitz, undated. House shown is where Harris grew up at 2212 South Florida Avenue in Lakeland.

Thank you Harris for sharing your story with all of us. We very much appreciate it! This is truly a gift for your family.

Who wants to be next? Please contact irmacole26@gmail.com

