Sharing a Sense of Belonging

Through a $1.9 million endowment to establish the Lillian and Emmanuel Slutzker Center for International Services, the former Manny's owner hopes to make international students feel at home.
Lillian Slutzker knows what it's like to grow up in another culture and come to the United States for the first time. When the Hungarian native arrived here in 1947, she wasn't sure what to expect. She still remembers the mixed emotions of her first weeks: excitement, confusion, worry, hope. When Lillian's husband-to-be promised "you’re going to love it here," she wanted to believe him, but cautiously warned, "America is for Americans. I'm a European." Lillian couldn't know then that she would come to love the United States and feel such a strong sense of belonging that she would one day want to share it with others. Now, thanks to a $1.9 million endowment to name and support the Lillian and Emmanuel Slutzker Center for International Services at Syracuse University, international students will be given that same opportunity.

Best known to the SU community as the former owner of Manny's athletic apparel store on Marshall Street, Lillian came to the United States to marry Emmanuel Slutzker, the American servicewoman she met at a USO dance in Wales on D-Day. Lillian, who had moved to England from Budapest after her parents were killed at Auschwitz, attended the dance with reluctance. "I didn't want to have anything to do with Americans," she says. "I thought they were too fresh!" When Manny proposed by telephone a week after they met, Lillian told him, "Let's see if you get back first." While Manny traveled through Europe with Patton's army and Lillian lived in London, they exchanged letters and got to know each other better.

After the war ended, Manny returned to his hometown of Rome, New York. Lillian followed in 1947, and the two were married. In 1949, they bought what was then a smoke shop on Marshall Street. "Manny sold everything in the store back then—clothing, hats, imported cigarettes," Lillian says. "He was a pioneer in the paperback business in Syracuse—the first to offer Penguin paperbacks." Manny's involvement with the textbook business led to a close and long-lasting relationship with the University community. Students and professors counted on him to carry the books they needed. "It was a lot of work to keep up with the demands of the textbook business," Lillian says, "but Manny always had what they were looking for, and he always had it on time."

When her husband's health began to deteriorate in the early eighties, Lillian took over the business. It was a difficult time, she says. "I'd work all day, then be up all night with him." Manny suffered from Alzheimer's disease for nine years before his death in 1985 at age 69. "It was sad to see such a bright man go downhill," Lillian recalls. After Manny's death, Lillian operated the store with help from their son Craig '79. "We worked holidays, Sundays, nights. I put in 16-hour days," she says. "It took me two years to win the respect of the business community, but I succeeded. I didn't know I had such talents!"

Although she sold the business in 1995, Lillian will always have what they were looking for, and he always had it on time.

ways reserve a special place in her heart for Manny's. She maintains a relationship with the current owners, and hopes to be involved when the store celebrates its 50th anniversary later this fall. "A lot has changed since we started out," she says.

She reminisces about former student athletes like the late Ernie Davis '62, whom she calls "a dear friend, a true gentleman," and Jim Brown '57, "I took his measurements once," she says. "His body was like iron." She remembers the days of unrest in the sixties when she cried to Manny: "After all I've been through, I can't take this. I've come to this country to escape." And she fondly recalls the many friends they made during their years of owning the store. "My husband had a rapport with the students," she says. "He'd listen to them, lend them a few dollars if they needed money. Alumni still come back and tell me how much they liked him."

Lillian has continued Manny's tradition of giving to the Syracuse community in a big way. first with $600,000 to fund two men's lacrosse scholarships, and now with the generous donation to the Office of International Services (OIS). The idea for this recent gift came about when Lillian contacted development director Paul Norcross '74 and said, "I want to give more to the University—something meaningful." She expressed an interest in supporting international students and their families, especially those from Central Europe, for whom she feels a special kinship.

Pat Burak G'96, director of the Office of International Services, was excited to learn of Lillian's generosity. "We're thrilled to have been chosen as the recipients of Mrs. Slutzker's gift," she says. "These funds will enhance our services for all international students."

The gift will be put to immediate use to improve the international services center. New furnishings and better lighting in the center will create a more inviting atmosphere for international students. "We want students to feel comfortable here, whether they come for coffee and conversation, to play the piano, or to do homework," Burak says. "The center is their home away from home." In addition, funds will be used to staff the center during evening hours, and to provide a graduate assistantship for an Eastern European student who will work in OIS.

"This office has a well developed reputation for providing programs, counseling, and assistance to people from all over the world," Burak says. "With this support from Mrs. Slutzker, we can individualize our services and further develop ways to meet the needs of our international students."

Plans are under way for a dedication ceremony, during which the Office of International Services will be officially renamed the Lillian and Emmanuel Slutzker Center for International Services. The ceremony will no doubt hold great meaning and countless memories for the generous woman who came to this country as a stranger, and learned to call it home.

"I love this country," Lillian says. "With this gift, I can give others the opportunity to know and appreciate it."