

# JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

## Stuart Weitzman's Cutting-Wedge Talent

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National Museum of American Jewish History  
CEO Ivy Barsky looks on as shoe designer Stuart Weitzman autographs one of his gladiator sandals for a woman who attended his talk at the museum on June 12.  
Photo courtesy of Matthew Christopher Photography

Stuart Weitzman is a rock star.

To be more precise, he is a shoe designer whose fans treat him like he's a rock star. There really is no other way to describe the scene at the National Museum of American Jewish History on June 12 following Weitzman's appearance. After his interview with WHYY's Zach Seward was finished, a crush of women a dozen deep at times waited for 20 minutes to get their picture taken with him and to have him autograph their shoes.

For his part, Weitzman, the founder of the eponymous shoe company and its current executive chairman, looked to be completely in his element, bantering with the crowd, smiling for photos and keeping a positively capitalistic attitude about embellishing his creations. "I try to sign as many shoes as I can — if I sign them, you can't return them," he explained with a laugh.

The 71-year-old Weitzman was the first speaker in the museum's new "Dreamers and Doers" series, which spotlights "the people who have been innovative in their business lives and innovative in their philanthropic lives," according to CEO Ivy Barsky. "We put the series together in the spirit of what an anonymous donor wanted to do: focus on imagination, entrepreneurship and doing good — the story that is told in our exhibitions."

She said Weitzman was the ideal choice to kick off the series. "He is open-minded, curious, has led a thoughtful life — and is an early American history buff who had already visited the museum on his own. We all fell head over high heels for him."

Weitzman was only too happy to participate. "I love this museum," he exclaimed, noting that "the guy who helped build it bought my company!" Sidney Kimmel's company, The Jones Group, bought a majority stake in Weitzman's company in 2010.

Weitzman freely admitted that he checks out another part of a woman's body — the foot — before he looks her in the eye. In his case, it is not only understandable — it's good business. He is one of the most successful shoe designers in the United States. His creations are worn by celebrities from Selena Gomez to Angelina Jolie to Jennifer Aniston. (For those who keep track of that sort of thing, Weitzman said that when Aniston was featured wearing his shoes, sales of that model were five times higher than those in which Jolie was photographed).

They are also worn by countless other American women, including, by Weitzman's own count, at least 47 of the some 350 people who came to hear him speak at the museum.

Despite all the attention brought to his company by fashionistas, Weitzman was emphatic that the people in the audience were his true inspiration. "I design for the career woman, the housewife, for the woman who wants to feel good and look modern — these are my muses, not fashionistas."

Weitzman knows who his market is, and he knows what it takes to reach them. A significant portion of the Wharton alum's talk was devoted to the importance of marketing, like his publicity coups that resulted from designing million-dollar sandals for one actress each year at the Oscars, his negotiating for product placement in the first *Spider-Man* movie in 2002 and his policy of never saying no to last-minute shoe requests from celebrities.

In addition to his relentless focus on putting his company's best foot forward, Weitzman had another explanation for why he paid so much attention to promotion. "You need to be in front of the public as much as you can in order to allow you to do the stuff that matters."

In his case, what matters is tzedakah. He and his wife, Jane, have been longtime philanthropists of Jewish causes, most notably their underwriting of the Harel Elementary School in the Israeli town of Bat Yam, which transformed the school into a cutting-edge educational facility. Weitzman has also spearheaded the shoe industry's commitment to raising millions of dollars for research into breast and ovarian cancer by creating auctions where people can buy one-of-a-kind shoes designed by actors, athletes and politicians, although he reluctantly says that "politicians are really not that good at designing shoes." Other beneficiaries of the Weitzmans' commitment include Maccabi USA, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish Heritage Grant Program of the World Monuments Fund.

Weitzman will be traveling to Israel in July as a member of the United States Maccabiah delegation as a Masters (35 and over) table tennis player. It's not the first time, either — he made the team four years ago as well. "I had to beat a guy who was 36 years old to get on the team this year. Boy, was he pissed," Weitzman said with evident satisfaction. "I have a good time, especially when I'm beating younger opponents."

Judging by the buzz throughout the fifth floor of the museum, those lucky enough to get tickets to Weitzman's talk had a good time as well. Gail Krimstock of Huntingdon Valley was all smiles after meeting the designer. "He just signed my brand-new pair of flats," she said. When asked how many pairs of Weitzman shoes she owned, she responded like everyone else who was asked

the same question —vaguely. “A lot,” was all she said, prompting her husband, Gary, who accompanied her to the event, to add: “She won’t say exactly how many in front of me.”