Thelma Rothman, a pillar of the Jewish community, dies at 91

Thelma P. Rothman, 91, co-founder of the Kane’s Furniture chain and an active and supportive member of the local Jewish community for many years, died on Tuesday, Oct. 19.

In addition to her support of Jewish organizations, she was a strong supporter of many other community institutions, particularly in the areas of health care, arts and education.

"Thelma Rothman was, without a doubt, one of the pillars of our Jewish community and a leader who set the bar extraordinarily high. Her contributions of time, talent, and treasure over the decades were remarkably generous and she had a very significant positive impact on the lives of so many," said Mark Segel, executive director of the Jewish Federation of Pinellas and Pasco Counties, speaking on behalf of the Federation’s Annual Campaign.

She was a major supporter of the Federation and a longtime Lion of Judah, an honor for those who make significant financial contributions to the Federation’s Annual Campaign. In 2006, she received the International Lion of Judah Kipnis-Wilson award and in 2003 she was honored as chairman of the board of the Federation’s Yitzhak Rabin Distinguished Community Service award.

More than three decades ago she saw the need for a local Jewish nursing home and was one of the founders and first officers of Menorah Manor. "It is hard to imagine this Jewish community without Thelma," said Suzanne M. Cohen, community relations officer of Menorah Manor. Her philanthropy was done with love, to enhance Jewish life here. Her legacies are her example to all of us of truly giving from the heart.

Another institution receiving significant support from Thelma was the Jewish Family and Community Services. Rochelle Tatria-Ray, Gulf Coast CEO, said, "Thelma was a personal inspiration, mentor and constant source of encouragement. She will remember her with tales of love and miss her dearly. She always made tzedekah, tikkun olam and assisting those in need a way of life each and every day."

She added, "Her generous support money was used for an adoption and permanency program for kids, and she provided money for the Yad Vashem program (a mentoring program for Jewish youth from single-family homes) as well as the holiday party those kids eagerly looked forward to.

Thelma Rothman was born in 1923 in Asheville, NC, the youngest of four children, and moved to St. Petersburg in 1946. In 1948 she and her husband, Maurice, predeceased her, co-founded Kane’s Furniture, with the first store opening at the corner of 8th Street and Central Avenue in St. Petersburg.

In 1973 she founded Art Festival Beth-EI, which has been held annually since and is now one of the premier art shows in the Southeast. She started the festival to raise money for educational programs at Temple Beth-El and as an outreach to the general community.

Rothman was a lifetime member of Hadassah, a supporter of the Florida Holocaust Museum and the now defunct JCC of Pinellas County. In 2004, she provided seed money for a medical unit in Sderot, Israel, which was then and continues to be a target for rocket fire from Gaza.

She was involved in children’s causes, supporting them with her time, advocacy, and philanthropy. She was her board member on the board of All Children’s Health System and as the chairman and founder of the All Children’s Hospital Foundation. She also served as a board member on the Pinellas County Education Foundation and the University of South Florida Stavros Institute of Free Enterprise.

She was a member of the Phi Gamma Delta sorority and a supporter of the Florida Holocaust Museum, Menorah Manor Foundation and Jewish Family and Community Services. In addition, she had included an endowment in the Rothman Family Foundation, which supports many local charities.

She received countless awards and honors for her involvement and philanthropy. Among them, in 2008 she was honored as the second female Ms. Sun by the Women’s Alliance of St. Petersburg. She was a recipient of the Florida’s “Finest” award from Gov. Lawton Chiles, and President Bill Clinton also praised her for her community philanthropy.

Survivors include daughters, Margie Green (Jim), Carol Lane (Richard) and Nancy Wygle; seven grandchildren and six great grandchildren.

The family requests donations be made to Gulf Coast Jewish Family & Community Services, 14041 Icot Blvd, Clearwater, FL 33766 (David C. Gross Funeral Homes, Central Avenue Chapel, St. Petersburg)