

Photo courtesy of Michael J. Wildes



BY ALIZA DAVIDOVIT

Democratic mayor and high-profile immigration attorney Michael J. Wildes serves in deference to the woman with the biggest mouth in America. It's not Rosie O'Donnell, Hillary Clinton, or even a Jewish mother-in-law. It's a woman whose mouth is three feet wide and yet has never uttered a single word. For over a century she has stood as a silent witness to the historic inflow of America's greatest treasures—its people and their burgeoning dreams. She is Lady Liberty and her symbolic message is loud: "We will not forget that liberty here made her home."

But in the depths of her silence is where Michael Wildes finds his convictions and his voice and makes them heard. As the grandson of Holocaust survivors who immigrated through Ellis Island, he recognizes that even the immutable rights of freedom and liberty need a vocal advocate. And at personal risk, he has taken on deeply controversial cases, often pro bono, and has dared to ring the freedom bell.

Wildes, who is an Orthodox Jew, is now serving his second term as mayor of Englewood, New Jersey, one of the Garden State's most affluent municipalities. He is a man who has reckoned with both his past and future and has full appreciation and respect for his traditions and background as well as for his duty and responsibility for the next generation of his family, the next generation of Americans, and the next generation of Jews. The 42-year-old father of four says it is very important to him that his children, more than anyone else, are proud of him. To maintain that pride he knows he must lead by

example. "In the accumulation of life experiences, it is not what you say that's important," Wildes empha-

sizes, "it is about what you do."

Wildes himself was raised in a home where self-development was ardently stressed, but selflessness, charitable behavior, and communal outreach were the *raison d'être*. In line with the Judaic teaching of *tikkun olam*, fixing the world, his younger brother, Mark, became a rabbi and he a public official. Trained as both a lawyer and a rabbi, Mark established Manhattan Jewish Experience, a trendy outreach organization, in memory of their mother. MJE has succeeded in bringing thousands of unaffiliated Jews in their 20s and 30s back to their Jewish heritage and now has three Manhattan locations.

MICHAEL J. WILDES

leading by example

As for Wildes, he says that being mayor has made him a better Jew and that being an Orthodox Jew has made him a better mayor. Although there are no sharp political skills needed for ceremonial ribbon cuttings (only sharp scissors), the sensitivity and sensibilities of the Jewish traditions provide a tremendous resource for a mayor who is often called upon to comfort families, firemen, congregants, and constituents in times of tragedy and loss. Often those visits have to be made on a *Shabbat*, the Jewish day of rest, when driving is prohibited. He is thus often seen walking for miles and miles to reach the homes or hearts of constituents who seek his support. Seeing that Englewood is 4.92 square miles, Wildes says that in the line of duty, he has definitely worn out a pair of Florsheims or two.

With a political and personal agenda to change the world, even if he has to reach that goal by foot, it is not a surprise that Wildes's favorite movie is *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, a film that famously depicts how one individual can make a meaningful difference. And though D.C. is a far walk from New Jersey, many feel the ambitious mayor is sprinting full speed ahead to the nation's capital. Although he did drop his recent challenge to run for State Senate at the behest of Governor Corzine, those close to him and in the know have already nicknamed him "Senator." The Democratic Leadership Council has listed him on the "100 to Watch" list, which profiles 100 new Democrat leaders around the country who are on the quick rise. Even Senator Ted Kennedy says that he has

"high expectations" Wildes will soon join him in Washington.

Wildes, born and raised in Queens, New York, started reading voraciously from a very young age. He was attracted to mysteries, intrigue, and problem solving—never getting enough of the Hardy Boys or other mind-teasing tales. Very often, after official bedtime, he would read by flashlight for hours under his blanket, only to be outed in the morning when he



Englewood's First Family: (l-r) Joshua Wildes, Lauren Wildes, Englewood Mayor Michael Wildes with his youngest, Jaclyn Wildes, Englewood's First Lady Amy Wildes, and Raquel Wildes.

Photo courtesy of Michael J. Wildes

was found fast asleep with an open book on his face. He was always curious and questioning.

As a youngster, Wildes wanted to be a police officer and would fingerprint all his friends and relatives. (Officer Mike eventually did work as an auxiliary police officer for the NYPD from 1982–1992, wearing his yarmulke all the while.) But then he moved on from fingerprinting to making plaster casts of footprints. (Today, the footprints he'd like to follow in are that of his mentor and friend, Joseph Lieberman, the Connecticut senator who's been coined the "conscience of the Senate.") It didn't take long for Wildes's reading to mature from children's books to newspapers. He wanted to learn more and more about everything, but especially

government and how it worked. "It was one thing after another," his father tells *Lifestyles*. "It was hard to keep up with him; we thought maybe he wanted to be in the FBI."

Wildes quickly realized that opportunities have a limited shelf life and thus committed himself from an early age to achieving his goals and differentiating himself from his peers. By 18, Wildes was already interning on the Hill with Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro and Congressman Gary Ackerman. But by that point he had a depth of under-

standing about life that would put all his future ambitions in true perspective. Four years prior, at the age of 14, he began volunteering for a local *Chevra Kadisha*, the Jewish burial society responsible for washing and preparing the bodies of the dead according to Judaic law. He continues to volunteer to this day. When Wildes's own mother, Ruth, died of breast cancer in 1995, it

was Wildes who placed the clay on her ever-shining blue eyes prior to her burial.

Thus, today, when this New Jersey mayor is blamed for wearing his ambition on his sleeve, he is not miffed or deterred. Indeed, he confesses that he is driven to reach his meaningful goals. With firsthand knowledge he reminds that shrouds have no pockets. "All one really has is the good he leaves behind."

And Wildes himself has a lot of good he still wants to do. "The minute you stop wanting to do something higher, you start going in reverse." And as if being a father, a husband, a member of many boards, a lawyer, and mayor is not enough, Wildes is also a certified emergency medical technician and will go out on Hatzolah calls (an emergency medical service that serves Jewish

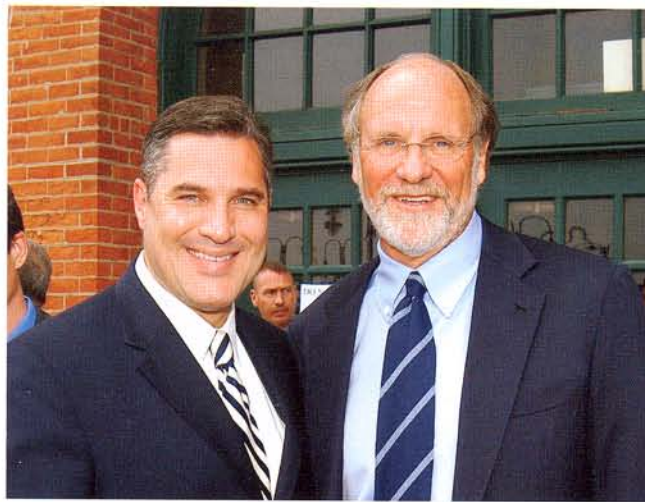
neighborhoods) in the middle of the night. "I love my life," Wildes says, "but I am not happy unless I've delivered something to somebody every day."

Working on the Hill, assisting in legislative research, and attending congressional sessions as a teenager further spurred his interest in the political process and how it shapes the country. "I was fascinated with American history and how it facilitated dreams," he says. He also felt that it was his duty as the grandson of Holocaust survivors and as a Jew to have a voice at the proverbial political table. His course had been set. Wildes began to get involved in local New York politics. In 1986, he graduated magna cum laude from Queens College, receiving honors in political science. He made the dean's list and was elected to Pi Sigma Alpha, a national political science honor society. In 1989, he graduated from the Benjamin Cardozo School of Law, where his father, Leon Wildes, a renowned immigration attorney, was an adjunct professor. He met his ever-gracious and beautiful wife, Amy, who is also a lawyer, in his father's class. Although Wildes got an "A+" and Amy got an "A", the pluses outweighed the minuses and the entire class clapped when Professor Wildes announced their engagement. "It was love at first glance," Wildes says. And they have been together for 17 years. The Elvis-loving mayor says, "My wife rocks."

After graduation, Wildes began working as a special assistant U.S. attorney at the United States Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York. He stayed there for nearly four years, working as a federal prosecutor

on cases dealing with immigration and naturalization, the FBI, the Internal Revenue Service, and an extensive range of other legal issues.

In 1993, Wildes joined his father's prestigious law firm, Wildes & Weinberg, perhaps the United States' premier law firm concentrating on the immigration and naturalization field. The firm, which consists of 14 attorneys and has a staff of 40, represents both individuals as well as corporations. The firm participated in efforts to liberalize



Mayor Michael Wildes with New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine at Liberty Park in New Jersey.

the immigration laws to permit even broader U.S. immigration and was sought out by major banks and industrial concerns to represent them in their efforts to secure needed personnel from abroad. Wildes's father, the founder of the firm, serves as senior partner and is best known for his successful representation of former Beatle John Lennon and his wife, Yoko Ono, in deportation proceedings spanning a five-year period. *New York* magazine has listed Leon Wildes as a "Best Lawyer in America" in immigration law for two years in a row.

Wildes has personally listed his dad as "Best Father in America" for 42 years in a row. He has idolized him since childhood and says that working with his father is extremely meaningful. As a

young child, Wildes would carry around a briefcase so he could be just like his father. He'd then be given a big law book to read for being a good boy—and he'd read it. The adoring son, who is so accomplished in his own right, says that if he could be anyone else for a single day, there is no one he would rather be than Leon Wildes. "Spending time with my father is one of the greatest gifts of my life," Wildes says, aching only that his beloved mother is not by his side as well.

But when Wildes joined the team at Wildes & Weinberg, he didn't platform himself as being the boss's son. He brought with him not only his experience, but the ever-burning fire inside to make a difference and to make every moment count. He has substantially contributed to the success of the firm and has brought in very high-profile cases, continually making headlines in defending the rights of freedom and liberty. He has helped on cases involving the surviving spouses

of 9/11 victims, some of whom lost their status when their partners were killed. Wildes helped clients like these win the right to stay in the U.S.

Wildes also made headlines by securing the cooperation of an accused terrorist who was implicated in the Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia—an atrocity in which 19 U.S. servicemen lost their lives. Under protection of the Capitol Police and wearing a flak jacket, Wildes went to Washington to speak with congressional leaders about Saudi Arabian diplomat Mohammed al-Khilewi's need for asylum after defecting and walking off with incriminating evidence of international terrorism and espionage. The diplomat made allegations that the Saudi government was planning to

Photo courtesy of Michael J. Wildes

assassinate Washington diplomats and had bugged the offices of the Jewish Defense League. Wildes prevailed and al-Khilewi was granted asylum. Wildes also represented Kwame James, who subdued "shoe bomber" Richard Reid, saving 197 passengers and crew members on American Airlines Flight 63 but who was nonetheless going to be deported because his visa had expired. He also helped a Manhattan doctor retrieve her three children from Syria, where they were allegedly being held unlawfully by her estranged husband. These are but a few cases among Wildes's relentless initiatives to do good and to be good. As a result, Wildes has become internationally renowned and is frequently called upon by network news to offer insight and expertise on crucial legal matters affecting the global community, from terrorism to the Patriot Act.

As for his political interests, Wildes began his elected career as an Englewood councilman in 1999. He was reelected in 2002, and was then elected mayor in 2004 and 2006. He was sworn in by New Jersey senator Frank Lautenberg with one hand raised up in oath to his office and the other hand resting on his grandfather's *chumash*, a holy book which, unlike six million Jews, survived Nazi persecution.

In addition to his ability to help himself, many leading Democrats, including Edward Kennedy, Hillary Clinton, Joseph Lieberman, Nancy Pelosi, and John Kerry have recognized and appreciated his fundraising prowess. Wildes takes pride in being appointed recently by New Jersey governor John Corzine to a Blue Ribbon State Panel on Immigration Policy—a recognition of his own per-

sonal talents and expertise in U.S. immigration law.

Wildes's ornate law office on Madison Avenue gives honest testimony to the success he has achieved. There is barely a spare inch on his walls, covered as they are with distinguished plaques and honors as well as photos of Wildes with extremely high-profile individuals, including U.S. presidents, prime ministers, rock stars, fashion models, and

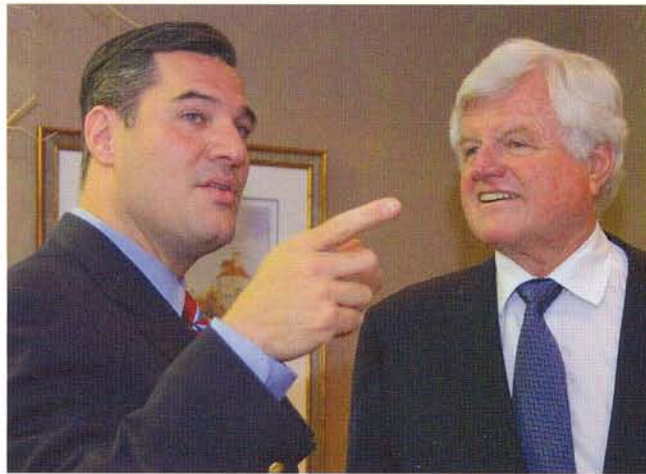


Photo courtesy of Michael J. Wildes

Wildes welcomed U.S. senator Ted Kennedy to his law offices in Manhattan for a NORPAC-sponsored fundraiser to assist the Senator's reelection in 2006.

Nobel laureates. And if one is to literally read the writing on his wall, then it's obvious that his ambitions are revving.

If he had to free up some wall space for the next meaningful and important picture, it will likely be one of him being sworn in as a senator—again with one hand raised and the other on his grandfather's *chumash*. In fact, Wildes already has all it takes to be a senator, for he's already been caught with his pants down. The only twist is that his off-with-the-pants saga is more breezy than hot. Among the most embarrassing moments of his life is when he split his pants while at work and sent his associate off to the tailor to get them fixed while he waited in the bathroom. Unfortunately, lunch became a priority and his co-worker

forgot to pick up the trousers and left an ever-chilling Wildes waiting for an hour. As he reflects on the incident, Wildes says it's too bad that there were no cell phones in those days. (Perhaps with just a few more hours to think in the lavatory, Wildes could have invented the cell phone, while miles away in some other toilet Al Gore was inventing the Internet.) But today there are mobile phones and the agile-tongued Wildes has four of them. Yes, he certainly talks a lot, but that's

because he has much to say and many to say it to. He gives voice and hope to the unempowered, he communicates counsel and expertise to his clients, he articulates his vision to his constituents and countrymen, he gives sound to the goals of the Democratic party, he speaks wisdom and love to his family and friends, he echoes ancient prayers to his God, he defends his Jewish homeland, and he protests loudly against injustice.

Reared in a tribe that suffered because of apathetic silence, Wildes insists on being heard. He's not worried about his mobile calling plan, just about his calling.

In his heart resonates the ever-present voice of his departed mother who taught him that it's more important to be a *mensch* than to be a mayor, to have inner strength instead of pomp and power, to live by example rather than to preach in default, and to nurture the roots rather than to polish the fruit. And it is by those guiding principles that Wildes leads his life. "One day I know I'll be a former something—former mayor, former senator, former... I don't know what," Wildes says realistically. But with steadfast values he will make certain the day never comes when he'll be the former Michael Wildes. lifestyles