

OTTAWA — Sara Vered, a local philanthropist and arts patron, will draw on the ideals of Israel's founding father, David Ben Gurion, when she speaks as the honouree Monday night at this year's Negev Dinner.

"It was really hard for me to accept this honour," says Vered, who, with her late husband, Ottawa builder Ze'ev Vered, has contributed millions to projects in Ottawa and Israel. "I like doing things behind the scenes. But I was persuaded to accept the honour because it would give me a chance to remind people what it was like in Israel (after its creation in 1948)."

Several hundred guests are expected to attend the Jewish National Fund's annual event. This year's dinner, a fundraiser for projects in Israel's Negev Desert, honours the soldiers who fought in Israel's War of Independence in 1948.

Vered was one of those soldiers. At 16, she served as a signal operator with the Haganah, the Jewish paramilitary organization that defeated the surrounding Muslim Arab nations that wanted, as a then-popular saying on the Arab street went, to push the Jews into the sea. She served in the Southern Front Headquarters in the Negev.

She remembers after the war, when she studied at the Tel Aviv Teachers Seminary, occasionally seeing Ben Gurion, who became Israel's first prime minister after the War of Independence, on the street. "He was one of my heroes. He always looked to the future, not to the past, even in his 70s. That's inspiring."

That example, among others, inspires Vered's speech. "Every human being has to have a vision, a dream that they work toward for the benefit of society. (In 1948) it was really touch-and-go. There was a very real possibility that we would all be killed. But we had a vision of Israel. That is what we lived for."

That vision included making the Negev Desert bloom. It was certainly something Ben Gurion wanted. When he retired from politics, he moved to a "cabin" on the outskirts of a kibbutz, Sde Boker, in the Negev. Today, much of what was once desert is now an oasis of green, with forests and crop fields.

The Jewish National Fund underwrites projects in the Negev such as treeplanting, dams, reservoirs and reclaiming arid land for agriculture.

Vered, who was born in Jerusalem and raised in Tel Aviv, came to Canada in 1956 with her husband. "Two countries are dear to me, Canada and Israel."

As a couple, they donated to numerous causes in Canada. For example, they gave \$1 million to the Vered Jewish Canadian Studies Program at the University of Ottawa, and supported the Heart Institute throughout several campaigns, donating more than \$1.7 million.

Vered has also been involved in organizations such as the National Gallery of Canada, the Royal Ontario Museum and the Vered-Israel Cultural and Educational Program to foster Israeli culture in Ottawa.

Monday night's guest speaker is Conservative MP and Treasury Board president Stockwell Day.

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