

## Donald J. Cohen, M.D., 1940–2001



אבן מאסו הבונים, היתה לראש פינה.

*The stone the builders discarded has become the cornerstone.*

CXVIII Psalm

**T**he same line that Donald Cohen used as the basis of his bar mitzvah speech continued to serve him well for the rest of his life. He used it to describe the trajectory of the Jewish boy of humble origins growing up in Chicago making it all the way to the academic major leagues at Yale. And yet, a biographical interpretation of the line represents just one example of many that imbue the line with significance as a leitmotif for a career unparalleled in contemporary child psychiatry.

A literal and concrete interpretation would be apt: one of Donald's greatest skills lay in transforming ideas into actual buildings. During his 18 years as Director, he created and transformed three new structures that contributed to turning the Yale Child Study Center into the premier institution of its kind: the Children's Psychiatric Inpatient Service at Yale-New Haven Hospital (1985), the Harris-Provence Child Development Unit (1988), and the Neison and Irving Harris Building (1999). With similar parts of passion and high diplomatic art, he secured prominent and central locations at the medical school for each of these buildings. He was also instrumental in moving the university's Hillel chapter from its wandering basement gatherings and improvised kosher kitchens into the Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale, located in the very heart of the university campus.

A scientific reading of the line points toward his recognized specialties: Tourette's syndrome and autism and the pervasive developmental disorders. Zeroing in on tics early in his career so as "to pursue a narrow phenomenon to its roots" (1), he saw the tic not as a footnote to the mental status examination but rather as a key to a deeper heuristic to bridge the mind/brain divide and as a springboard for complementary treatment interventions equally grounded on either side (2). His work in autism was in large part devoted to understanding and listening to those same individuals who had been written off as incapable of communicating meaningfully and to following the string of their social communicative mishaps to their deepest core (3).

Donald's contributions as a humanitarian and a visionary of social policy once again took the disenfranchised into prominent roles. As president of the International Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Allied Professions (1992-1998), he dedicated much of his later career to addressing the mental health needs of children in poor and war-torn nations. His novel approaches to helping children traumatized as helpless bystand-

ers, which he jointly developed first in New Haven and then in Israel, have not only been replicated widely, but recognized in the dedication of the Harris-Cohen Center for Trauma in Tel Aviv (2002) and in the Donald J. Cohen National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative, presented to Congress in late 2001. He saw his commitment to ethically disciplined research specifically tailored to the needs of children as a "moral imperative" and would not allow child psychiatry to acquiesce to an "orphan" status, as if childhood was an anomalous and rare state of being and the diseases of childhood were of secondary importance" (4).

Donald Cohen was a perennial optimist and champion of the underdog. His words on the role of mentorship serve as a reminder for humility in facing our awesome responsibility as teachers. The most inconspicuous of our students may well become the vehicle, indeed the very cornerstone, to carry our lessons and our values forth: "As teachers and doctors, we offer ourselves to be metabolized by students and patients, and we enjoy seeing our thoughts and attitudes become internalized and thus immortalized. We do not know which student will carry what part of us into the future...and make our work and beliefs a part of him or herself. We know that only through risking ourselves in true encounters—in family and in our teaching—is there any hope for surviving, at least in part" (1).

### References

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3. Cohen DJ, Volkmar FR (eds): *Handbook of Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders*, Second Edition. New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1997
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ANDRÉS MARTIN, M.D., M.P.H.

Address reprint requests to Dr. Martin, Yale Child Study Center, 230 South Frontage Rd., New Haven, CT 06520; andres.martin@yale.edu (e-mail). Image on left: Neison and Irving Harris Building, Yale Child Study Center; image on right: Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale.