

Channeling his influence

Sid Topol made TV history.

Then he retired and really started to make a difference.

The next time you turn on CNN or HGTV or ESPN, give a little thanks to Sid Topol.

You might remember the 1975 boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier, famously referred to as the Thrilla in Manila. It was the first broadcast of a continuous signal via satellite, beamed across the world via a new cable channel called HBO, and it made television history.

That was Sid's satellite technology, and it opened the door to the birth of cable television.

Even with that, it's hard to say which part of Sidney Topol's life has been more influential: his communications career or his philanthropy. For the near 95-year-old Boston resident and UMass alum (Class of '47), the two went hand-in-hand.

"Philanthropy and community involvement were an integral part of me being a CEO," he said in a UMass interview. "Interestingly, you don't have to give a lot of money, you just have to show up and be active."

Born in 1924 to Yiddish-speaking immigrant parents from Poland, Sid was raised in Dorchester. He attended UMass (then named Massachusetts State College) in 1941, which opened the door to his love of science and mathematics.

"I was a member of the Jewish fraternity Alpha Epsilon Pi, and my frat brothers weren't so religious, though we were all proud to be Jewish," Sid says. "We were busy studying, listening to a lot of jazz, playing sports and were very cynical back then. We drank a lot of scotch because the war was coming and we were always saying goodbye to someone."

In 1943, he joined the army and was introduced to working with antennas within the Radar program at MIT.

After finishing school, Sid was hired by Raytheon and, in 1965, became head of its communications division.

"I made it clear to Raytheon I did not



Sid Topol (Class of 1947) was a pioneer in TV communications.

want to work on military projects. ... I transferred out of the antenna branch of Raytheon to the Communications department and became a project manager on something called a portable microwave link, which, say, could be set up at Fenway Park on a tripod with a dish ... and connects to cameras so you could do remotes – fires, burglaries, baseball," he said. "I was a pioneer in electronic news gathering. The key thing was that I was able to combine the audio and the color altogether in one. That was a breakthrough. It was a big commercial success for Raytheon."

When it became clear that Raytheon was more interested in military contracts than communication, Sid – with his wife Libby and their daughters – moved to Georgia in 1971 to take the reins as president, and later CEO, of Scientific Atlanta. It was his work at Scientific Atlanta that played a key role in the history of broadcast communication, creating the cable satellite connection, which allowed for signals sent from satellites in space to be received by portable stations on earth. When the Ali-Frazier fight was beamed across the world by satellite, TV was forever changed.

Topol's time at Scientific Atlanta was significant for him in another way: It's where his philanthropic efforts really took shape. He realized he "not only had obligations to the sharehold-

ers, but also to the community."

He backed progressive political candidates and was also heavily involved in social justice by supporting causes that fought poverty, racism, and inequality. In the mid-'80s, he worked on a project to fund a science and technology museum in Atlanta.

After winning the Electronic Industry Association Medal of Honor award in 1989, Sid retired and moved the family back to Boston in 1990. He started thinking about how he could use his financial success to further support causes he believed in.

"[Before I retired], I was in the corporate world, which is right of center. I had to be cautious, unfortunately, about some of my philosophy and political points of view," he said. "Now I speak my piece, and I don't have to be afraid."

Besides giving generously to his alma maters, Boston Latin high school, UMass and UMass Hillel, and offering scholarships and grants through various universities, Sid continues to fund organizations promoting education, peace and nonviolence.

He traces the beginning of his philanthropy at UMass Hillel to the dedication of the Maxwell H. Goldberg Jewish Living and Learning Community in 1998. Goldberg was a UMass alum and professor, who helped establish Hillel in Amherst. "I wanted to give in recognition of Goldberg," he says.

Sid continues giving to this day. His foundation has provided nearly \$4 million to his chosen causes.

Among those causes are Americans for Peace Now, J Street, and the Parents Circle-Families Forum, organizations advocating for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to end through peaceful and diplomatic measures.

"I grew up in a very progressive family and now I'm very focused on Black Lives Matter and non-violence," he says. "I'm pro-Israel and also pro-Palestinian, and all about reconciliation and peace."

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