



A SOCIAL-ENTERPRISE ENTREPRENEUR FROM PITTSBURGH, WITH A REMARKABLE RECORD OF SUCCESS AND A RESUME FULL OF HONORS, IS ABOUT TO TEST HIS BRAND OF OPTIMISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST. CAN WILLIAM STRICKLAND JR. AND HIS PARTNERS CREATE HOPE AND OPPORTUNITY FOR ARABS AND JEWS?

# T H E H O P E M A K E R

WRITTEN BY PAMELA GOLDSMITH ■ PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT GOLDSMITH

“IMAGINE THIS,” SAYS STRICKLAND. “HERE IS A SIX-FOOT-FOUR BLACK MAN SITTING IN A BAR IN THE MIDDLE OF AN ARAB NEIGHBORHOOD IN ISRAEL TRYING TO CONVINCE PEOPLE THAT THIS IS A GOOD IDEA THAT COULD POSSIBLY ALTER A CONFLICT THAT HAS LASTED FOR CENTURIES.”

Akko, an ancient city of about 45,000 people perched on Israel’s northern coast, is a UNESCO World Heritage site, dating roughly to 2,000 BCE. The city has seen its share of trouble. Through the ages, Akko was besieged by the Egyptians, the Romans, the Crusaders, the Ottomans, Alexander the Great, and Napoleon, among others.

In modern times, too, Akko knows conflict. It was once part of a larger Palestine (via the 1923 British Mandate) and was later envisioned within an Arab state. Then, during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the city was claimed by Israel, yet today still has a large Arab population.

While interaction between Arabs and Jews is more common in Akko than in most other Israeli cities, historic tensions unavoidably simmer beneath the surface of daily life. Different cultures, segregated schools, and centuries of turbulent relations still separate the lives of Jewish and Arab children in this port city on Haifa Bay.

Yet, one man believes he knows how to change that—possibly contributing to a new history in the region. That man, William E. Strickland Jr., a Pitt alumnus and trustee, acknowledges he must have sounded rather credulous when he first made his case to community leaders in Akko.

“Imagine this,” says Strickland. “Here is a six-foot-four Black man sitting in a bar in the middle of an Arab neighborhood in Israel trying to convince people that this is a good idea that could possibly alter a conflict that has lasted for centuries.”

What Strickland offered was an educational, job training, and youth arts center that would bring together Jewish and Arab students in mutual coexistence. Half of the students would come from a Jewish vocational school in Akko, and half from an Arab vocational school in the city.

In spring 2016, that center—the Northern Israel Center for Arts and Technology—is slated to open. But, like so much in Jewish-Arab relations, getting there hasn’t been easy.

The seed of the idea for the center in Akko was planted by Strickland’s longtime friend and business associate, Mark S. Frank, a Pitt law school alumnus and attorney at Pittsburgh’s Campbell & Levine law firm. The idea brought together Strickland’s proven success in establishing life-transforming educational centers with Frank’s desire to find common ground among people

with an ancient history of discord. Was that even possible?

Strickland is founder and CEO of the Manchester Bidwell Corporation, which offers innovative arts education and job-training programs based in Pittsburgh. Manchester Bidwell’s approach is founded on the premise that creative arts have the power to transform lives by motivating achievement and boosting self-esteem. Programs include art and music education, social enterprise opportunities, and career training in areas as diverse as chemistry technician practice, horticulture, medical coding, and the culinary arts. The job-training programs, often designed with the cooperation of businesses in search of trained workers, typically yield model employees for those businesses. What results are hope, dignity, and genuine opportunity. The model Strickland developed in Pittsburgh has been replicated in eight other U.S. cities, including Chicago, Boston, and San Francisco.

Nearly a decade ago, at an event where his friend, Strickland, was being honored for his achievements, Frank had an epiphany. In his remarks, Strickland spoke about the way that a respectful, beautiful, nurturing environment also breaks down barriers between people; and he described how there had never been even one racial incident at the Bidwell center, despite a very diverse, urban population of students.

Suddenly, the idea struck Frank: the ultimate testing ground for the center’s life-transforming philosophy would be in Israel, with Arabs and Jews.

“It breaks down barriers when you give people a common aspiration,” says Frank (LAW ’74). “So, I got this idea in my head, and I just decided that it needed to be done.” He wanted to help Strickland take his life-changing, maybe even life-saving, program to individuals in Israel, both Arab and Jewish.

Ever since, Frank has been central to the logistics of creating the Akko center, building relationships, raising funds, and nurturing the dream.

Initially, the odds were against the success of the unusual proposal. “Five people told me I couldn’t make this happen,” says Strickland about laying the groundwork with Frank. “I was told I couldn’t get the funding from the United States or from Israel.” But Akko’s leaders embraced the idea, with support from key players including the city’s mayor, Shimon Lankri, and others in government and education. In time, some local Israeli donors were attracted to the project, along with instrumental support from Chicago businessman Steve Sarowitz and his wife, Jessica. Now, the vision for the Akko center is about to come true.

Foremost, Strickland expects that the center in Akko will shift the focus from what divides Arabs and Jews to what can be achieved as a community with shared aspirations. “The goal is education, providing everyone with the same prospects under one roof,” he says. “That in itself diminishes barriers in a monumental way.”

The Pitt alumnus truly believes that offering a creative outlet for self-expression and providing real opportunities for meaningful employment will promote a sense of unity and peace among the students. He has the track record to make others believe it, too.

“Creating centers like Bidwell across the United States evolved out of a relationship-building strategy—and it works,” says Strickland. “That’s why we can scale it. Akko’s mayor readily embraced the idea of that model because it’s progressive and reflects his philosophy of government’s role. The rest is history.”

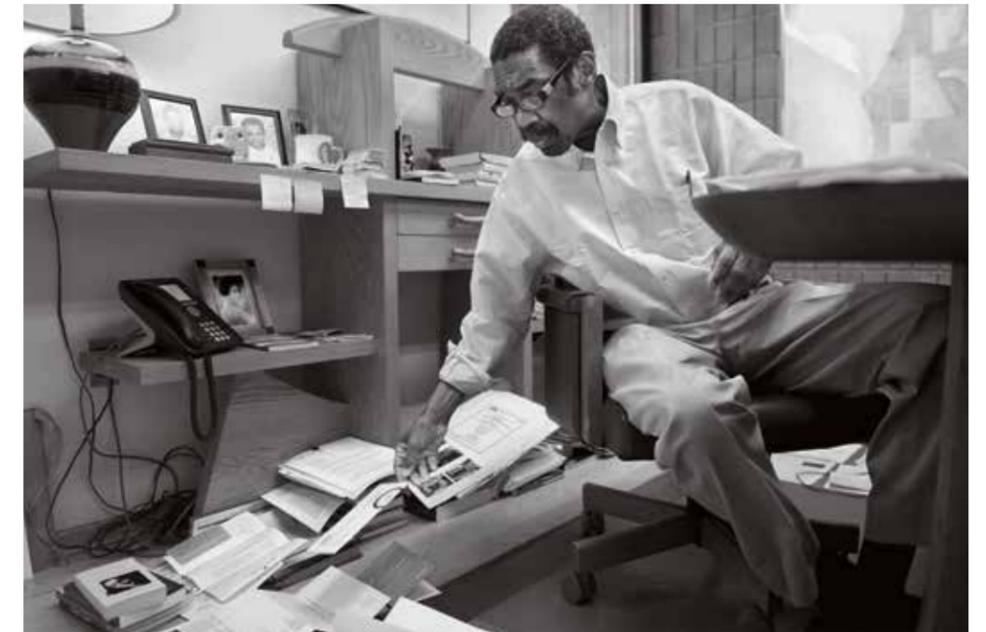
It doesn’t hurt that Strickland’s centers are also effective economic drivers, strategically connecting well-trained students with local job opportunities. Strickland says that Mayor Lankri knew the innovative model, already proven in the United States, would ultimately generate jobs and improve lives.

“In the presence of education and opportunity, the commonality of disadvantaged populations can lead to widespread economic progress,” explains Strickland. “It’s a conversation-starter for the rest of the world.”

Officials in Akko were impressed not only by the creativity of Strickland’s approach but also by his personal story. The change-maker once dealt with his own share of chaos and dissension, growing up in the Manchester neighborhood of Pittsburgh. It was a life circumscribed by poverty, gangs, and drug dealers. Yet, against all odds, Strickland (A&S ’70) would go on to graduate with a bachelor’s degree, cum laude, with a major in history from the University of Pittsburgh and launch a remarkable career defined by giving all that he could back to the community where he was raised.

Strickland openly shared his impassioned message with the people of Akko, revealing that growing up in difficult circumstances once destroyed his sense of hope. It took a high school art teacher to open his eyes to things that would forever change his life—like throwing a pot from a lump of clay and listening to jazz. The magic of creative expression, a sense that he could create something beautiful, that

STRICKLAND SAYS THAT MAYOR LANKRI KNEW THE INNOVATIVE MODEL, ALREADY PROVEN IN THE UNITED STATES, WOULD ULTIMATELY GENERATE JOBS AND IMPROVE LIVES. “IN THE PRESENCE OF EDUCATION AND OPPORTUNITY, THE COMMONALITY OF DISADVANTAGED POPULATIONS CAN LEAD TO WIDESPREAD ECONOMIC PROGRESS,” EXPLAINS STRICKLAND. “IT’S A CONVERSATION-STARTER FOR THE REST OF THE WORLD.”



“ENVIRONMENT SHAPES BEHAVIOR,” SAYS STRICKLAND, INVOKING HIS DEEPEST BELIEF—THAT AT-RISK POPULATIONS WILL FLOURISH WHEN LEARNING IN AN ENVIRONMENT OF BEAUTY AND RESPECT. IT’S A PHILOSOPHY THAT HAS BEEN PROVEN BY DECADES OF WELL-DOCUMENTED SUCCESS IN PITTSBURGH AND OTHER U.S. CITIES. NOW, THAT SAME PHILOSOPHY WILL SHAPE THE NORTHERN ISRAEL CENTER FOR ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY IN AKKO.

he deserved beauty, changed his spirit and led him to success. Each of his Manchester Bidwell programs is an elaboration of that belief: the most effective way to give others that same uplifting experience of “creating” is by surrounding them with beauty. His original center on the North Side of Pittsburgh is a welcoming place, artfully designed, filled with sunlight, pots of orchids, and inspiring works of art. According to Strickland, the effect is transforming.

“Environment shapes behavior,” he says, invoking his deepest belief—that at-risk populations will flourish when learning in an environment of beauty and respect. It’s a philosophy that has been proven by decades

of well-documented success in Pittsburgh and other U.S. cities. Now, that same philosophy will shape the Northern Israel Center for Arts and Technology in Akko.

“The center in Akko should be a beautiful space where kids that are disaffected and adults who are chronically unemployed can see opportunity before them,” says Strickland. “It should be a symbol that life could be different.”

The curriculum there will also mirror Pittsburgh’s center. Strickland envisions culinary classes, and courses in medical technology, computer technology, and horticulture. The center will also launch its first after-school training curriculum in innovative new technologies, including 3D printing.





IN 1996, HE WAS NAMED A MACARTHUR FELLOW, A PRESTIGIOUS HONOR ALSO KNOWN AS A “GENIUS” AWARD. IN 2005, HE RECEIVED THE INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL’S CITIZEN LEADERSHIP AWARD; AND, IN 2011, HE TRAVELED TO TOKYO TO ACCEPT THE GOI PEACE AWARD, PRESENTED ANNUALLY TO HONOR AN INDIVIDUAL OR ORGANIZATION THAT HAS CONTRIBUTED TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF WORLD PEACE AND HUMANITY. THE LAUNCH OF THE AKKO CENTER WILL FURTHER THIS MISSION.

Some might question whether a program designed to reach economically challenged people in urban areas of the United States will translate to the complicated political and cultural realities of the Middle East—but people who know Strickland well have no doubts.

No one has more faith in this model than former eBay president Jeff Skoll, who is a big supporter of Strickland’s. Of the more than 80 social-enterprise organizations around the world in which the Skoll Foundation invests, Skoll sits only on the board of the National Center for Arts and Technology, the board that is building replications of Strickland’s programs, nationally and internationally.

“Jeff encouraged me to scale the model beyond Pittsburgh,” says Strickland. “He said, ‘You’ve got a great idea, and you need to take it to the world. Your program is scalable.’”

Mark Frank, a driving force behind the Akko center, agrees: “Scaling a model that’s worked among challenged, urban populations of Whites and Blacks in the United States should work just as well among culturally diverse and religiously divergent populations in Israel.”

Noting that neither Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild nor Bidwell Training Center have ever had metal detectors or security guards, nor any incidence of crime, violence, or disrespect to the facilities, Frank insists that all students must feel welcome and safe. He is satisfied that officials in Akko have committed to providing office and operating space for the project in an area that is “neutral” to those who will attend.

That sense of safety and inclusion, Strickland believes, will give Arabs and Jews a new way to interact with each other. And that, ultimately, is his goal—that this program of free education and artistic expression will prompt dialogue among Akko’s varied cultural and religious populations.

Strickland’s U.S. programs have altered the lives of thousands and won him wide acclaim in the state, the nation, and abroad. In 1996, he was named a MacArthur Fellow, a prestigious honor also known as a “genius” award. In 2005, he received the International Economic Development Council’s Citizen Leadership Award; and, in 2011, he traveled to Tokyo to accept the Goi Peace Award, presented annually to honor an individual or organization that has contributed to the

advancement of world peace and humanity. The launch of the Akko center will further this mission.

“Jews and Arabs will be educated, trained, and inspired together to try things never imagined in their wildest dreams under one roof,” he says.

It is Strickland’s hope that a successful outcome at the Akko center will set an example in the Middle East and contribute to conversations in other regions and countries. “A lot of good can come about when Arabs and Jews are taking classes together, sitting on boards together, and solving problems together ... that’s big!”

He wants the same thing for the people of Akko that he wanted when he launched the Manchester Bidwell programs in Pittsburgh, “a beautiful place where people who feel hopeless can ultimately find opportunities ... to work, build homes, and take care of their families just like anybody else,” he says.

But Strickland also has a larger goal in mind: “The world needs to figure out a way to get along.” The ancient city of Akko may soon offer a new road forward. ■