

DANI MACHLIS /BGU



The woman who made Beersheba bloom

Rivka Carmi is stepping down as president of BGU in December after 12 years

By Maayan Hoffman

RIVKA CARMİ is all about firsts.

As dean of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev's Faculty of Health Sciences in 2000, Carmi was the first woman to head an Israeli university's medical department. When she became BGU's president in 2006, she became the country's first female university leader. She was also the first woman to chair the Committee of University Presidents.

But in December 2018, Carmi will serve her last month as head of Beersheba's BGU.

"This is the 12th and last year of my tenure as BGU president and the most significant

and meaningful time of my life," she told *The Jerusalem Report*. "Twelve years of enormous challenges – including three wars in five years in the south – and outstanding accomplishments. Under my watch, the university has managed to become a leading institution of higher education that also hugely benefits the region and its students.

"Before I came on board, we had a university with a city around it. Now, there is a city with a university in it."

But Carmi did not do her job sitting down. She stood first and foremost for the pursuit of gender equality in Israel's universities.

Rivka Carmi with students who participate in the university's Community Action program, through which hundreds of students volunteer in Beersheba

She said that when she was a pediatric resident, she became “acutely aware of gender discrimination and the real obstacles women have in science – at BGU and around the world.”

Carmi said the battle is, on the one hand, about balancing scientific and personal careers – breaking the glass ceiling – and, on the other hand, about shattering the “steel ceiling” formed of the misperception that women are less capable than men in science, technology, engineering and math.

“It’s the way a girl versus a boy is raised – blue versus pink, cars versus dolls, humanities versus science,” she explained. “A glass ceiling you can break by establishing a daycare on campus. But you must work very hard on perceptual barriers.”

At BGU, Carmi established a fund that provides female applicants with nearly anything they might need – from overseas training, to funds to publish a book, to assistance in their research. BGU was the first Israeli campus to open a nursing room and is one of only a few offering daycare. BGU was also the first university to stop the tenure clock – even before it was mandated by the Council for Higher Education – allowing women faculty and PhD candidates to have an extra year for each pregnancy and birth.

Carmi also established BGU support workshops for women faculty members, especially in the fields of medicine and science, where she said the “playground was created by men... We must educate women about the rules of the playground and how to cope with them, while simultaneously aspiring to change the rules.”

Today, she said, half of science, technology, engineering and math undergraduates are women, while only 20 percent of full professors in those fields are female. From Carmi’s perception, it’s not just about social justice, but success. She said research shows that companies whose top management team is comprised of at least 30 percent women are more profitable, and the same will hold true in academia.

“If you are a woman who has made it to the top, you have to be totally committed



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Carmi in the driver's seat with BGRacing, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev's student race car team

to the cause of women’s equality, and you must – on top of all the obligations and worries that come with the job – constantly work to pave the way, by any means possible, for your fellow women,” she said.

From lab to leader

Carmi, born three months after the founding of the State of Israel, got her own start in science as a public school student in Zichron Yaakov.

“At 14, I knew that I would be a genetics researcher,” she told The Report. I was fascinated by the human cell in which, during cell division, pairs of chromosomes exchange parts with each other in order – so said my biology teacher – to increase variability in the world. I was determined to discover the secret behind this amazing explanation.”

After high school, she served as an officer during the 1973 Yom Kippur War and helped establish a unit for locating soldiers missing in action. She then enrolled at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem to study biology but switched to medicine and genetics.

“I graduated from medical school in 1975 and I was offered an internship at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem and at Beilinson in Tel Aviv,” Carmi recalled. “Instead, I chose Soroka Hospital in Beersheba. I felt that in the Negev I would be able to contribute the most to my country. I was captured by the vision of David Ben-Gurion that in the Negev the genius of the people of Israel will be tested.”

When Carmi arrived in the Negev there were almost more camels than people.

Following her board certification in pediatrics and neonatology, and a medical genetics fellowship at Harvard Medical School, she was once again offered a prestigious position, this time at Boston Children’s Hospital. She turned it down to “go back home and build the Genetics Institute at the Soroka University Medical Center and take genetic research of the Bedouins to its next phase,” she said.

Her research and clinical work focused on local Bedouin women. Carmi introduced new methods to halt spreading hereditary diseases, identifying 12 new genes and three syndromes – one named Carmi syndrome.

Carmi said she never envisioned becoming BGU president when her predecessor, former Labor MK Avishay Braverman, announced he was going into politics. But Braverman and the BGU community wanted her for the role, she said with a laugh, “and the rest is history.”

She built it and they came

When Carmi became president, she was quoted as saying, “I’m not Herod,” meaning that her aim was not merely to build “because buildings are far less important than what happens with them.”

But build she has, physically, as well as programs to fill the buildings.

She established the National Institute for Biotechnology in the Negev, a for-profit company within the university, and a research

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Carmi takes part in Student Day celebrations

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Medical students analyze notes with Carmi in the neonatal ward

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Late president Shimon Peres and Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel watch as University of Chicago president Robert J. Zimmer and BGU president Rivka Carmi sign an agreement in 2017 to work together to find more efficient ways of using water to produce energy and of using energy to treat and deliver clean water

facility with state-of-the-art laboratories that significantly contribute to advancing basic biomedical research. It has strengthened the potential for commercialization of BGU's new biomedical discoveries.

Carmi opened the Advanced Technology Park next to the university.

"At the beginning, some thought we were really crazy," Carmi said. "Signing the paperwork made my hands tremble."

However, today – with its two bridges, three buildings housing international corporations, 2,500 employees, a cyber-tech hub and the national civil Computer Emergency Readiness Team – "it seems almost obvious."

In parallel, the school deepened ties between research and industry, first with Deutsche Telekom and later IBM for cyber research.

Around the same time, the government decided to move elite IDF hi-tech and intelligence units to the Negev, leaning heavily on the university and providing it with a historic opportunity to become a leading academic power in strategically important fields.

Carmi said the university defined the requisite core capabilities to meet the needs of the IDF's technological, intelligence and computer units.

"We focused our research on cyber, robotics – with a special emphasis on autonomous robotics – electro-optics and AI research," she said. "This approach was a genuine game changer and concrete proof of the university's role as the most central and significant force for the Negev's development."

By 2015, Beersheba was one of seven cities worldwide singled out by T3 Advisors and Brandeis International Business School's first joint Global Technology Emerging Markets study as up-and-coming hubs, which technology and life sciences companies should consider as they evaluate their global location strategy.

"People who haven't been here for five years think it's a different place," said Carmi. "People who haven't been here for 30 years don't recognize it. They think it's a different country."

A president of the people

In Beersheba, everyone knows Carmi.

Vered Sarousi Katz, who runs BGU's Community Action Department, said Carmi never shied away from getting her hands dirty through community outreach. Katz, who reports directly to Carmi, hosts programs on campus for prisoners and youth at risk, recruiting hundreds of student volunteers to teach and tutor thousands of underprivileged people.

"We don't want to be an ivory tower that is disconnected from where we're located," Katz said. "Rivka's method is to first say yes and then figure out how to do it. Does she succeed? Always."

Rina Taeibi expresses similar sentiments.

Taeibi runs Moadon Yated, a center for children with Down syndrome. She met young, pediatric geneticist Carmi 40 years ago when she gave birth to her son, Erez, who has Down syndrome. Carmi examined Erez as a little boy and offered Taeibi the "support, strength and security" to raise a special child.

For more than a decade, though Erez was no longer a patient, Carmi would check in on his development. Then, one day, she called Taeibi for a different reason.

"She says, 'I want you to open a program for kids with Down syndrome,'" Taeibi recalled. "I said, 'I am just a simple woman.' But Rivka insisted, 'I only want you.'"

Taeibi and her husband were in transition with their own business, so her husband – a facilities manager – found a suitable location for the program and Taeibi managed the content. The program is still full and thriving 20 years later. Carmi serves as its president.

"The kids come with such happiness to take part, and the parents are happy too," said Taeibi. "If Rivka had not been behind it, I am not sure if it would have succeeded. She does everything with a full heart."

Prophetess of the Bedouins

Even as she grew in her career, she did not forget the Bedouin on which her original research was centered.

Riad Agagbaria, the School of Pharmacy's former chairman and a professor of health

sciences, said he and Carmi worked closely for almost 23 years, building a program to integrate the local Bedouin community into academia at BGU, specifically in health sciences.

In 1995, according to Agagbaria, there were no female Bedouin doctors and only 10 male physicians. Today, there are 20 female Bedouin doctors, and at least 20 students at different stages of their studies. The school has graduated 50 Bedouin pharmacists, 150 nurses and several physical therapists and paramedics – two-thirds of them female.

"When Rivka was the dean of health sciences, she supported and promoted the program and expanded it," said Agagbaria.

He said Carmi offered these students extra classes and free tutoring, and found donors to give them scholarships. She would even help arrange financial assistance to get the brightest to the best universities abroad.

"She's the prophetess of the Bedouin community," said Agagbaria.

Defender of Israel

She is also a strong opponent of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement and believes it killed collaboration between Israel and Palestinians, but has "no real impact, not on my university or any university in Israel" because of Israel's worldwide reputation for excellence.

"Researchers are looking for ways to cooperate with us," she said. "Every now and then a faculty member will tell of an incident that has a BDS flavor to it – but these are very isolated cases."

Before BDS and the second intifada, Ben-Gurion quietly maintained joint training and research projects with Palestinian and other Arab universities. A program Carmi created with the Jordanian Red Crescent trained Jordanian students in emergency medicine. It was kept under wraps for fear it would be sabotaged and eventually closed for lack of funding.

Today, there might be collaboration on water research with the Palestinian Authority at Sde Boker or a couple of Palestinian students studying health sciences, but nothing more.

Even as she grew in her career, she did not forget the Bedouin on which her original research was centered

"We support Palestinian students with scholarships, because I think each and every one of them is our ambassador when they go back and will perceive us not through our geopolitical problems but as human beings, researchers and academicians," she said.

She believes students are the key to tackling BDS. She recommends bringing more student thought leaders and activists to Israel.

"Most of them are just ignorant," she said of young BDS activists. "The most effective technique is bringing people from abroad to Israel to see the country not through the prism of the conflict, but rather as a westernized, democratic state – an active country – with a conflict that is extremely complex."

Carmi said she hoped BGU could play a role in those efforts. She told The Report she always wanted BGU to be judged not solely as an educational institution with excellent research and teaching, but also as a force of change and development for the region, the state and the future of Israel.

BGU, she said, is "kind of a start-up" in and of itself. "We dream, blaze new trails, innovate and never rest on our laurels."

Though she doesn't know what's next for her – except for her standard 45-minute daily exercise routine and likely the next episode of the Israeli political thriller "Fauda" (she's an addict) – Carmi is confident it will be in Israel.

Carmi said, "I'm so proud of Israel's independence and its emerging as the 'Start-Up Nation,' as a source of knowledge and development in every aspect of life, and as a contributor to the betterment of humanity around the world." ■