

And now for something completely different:



Shoot for the moon, CFL commissioner tells youths

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Special to the CJN

Not many people can say they've worked for three of North America's six major sports leagues, but Mark Cohon, the commissioner of the Canadian Football League, certainly can.

A lucky group of Toronto's Jewish young adults got the opportunity to rub shoulders with Cohon when he gave a talk about his career and his life at Jewish Urban Meeting Place's (JUMP) midtown headquarters on May 13.

"All my friends call me the 'commish,' so all my Jewish friends call me the 'knish,'" Cohon said to the audience with a smile.

About 50 people packed into JUMP to hear Cohon speak. The event was part of the Jewish Employment Toronto (JET) series, aimed at Jewish professionals in their 20s and 30s. JET is a collaborative effort between JUMP and Birthright Israel Alumni Community that includes career workshops and talks by successful professionals.

"Once a month we try to feature a different type of outlet for young professionals to gain new skills in the workplace," said Debbie Osiel, JUMP's director. The JET series kicked off last November and has been a successful part of JUMP's programming since.

First-time JET-attendee Olivia Glauberzon, 26, was happy to hear Cohon's story.

"I think it's good to meet people who are in successful positions and to learn from them," she said



Cohon has worked and lived around the world, frequenting countries such as Japan, Israel and England, an experience that he encouraged everyone in the room to try given the opportunity.

Cohon said that working with professional sports leagues taught him the important lesson of "the power of sport to really give people hope and aspiration, to really get people to think about life and what they want to become."

Former captain of his high school football team and an avid sports fan his whole life, Cohon found himself a bit at odds when, following his career at the NBA, he moved back to Toronto to become president and CEO of AudienceView, a software company that allows venues, entertainment companies and teams to sell tickets online directly to their customers, without using an agent such as Ticketmaster.

Although his hard work at AudienceView earned Cohon the honour of being named one of Canada's Top 40 Under 40 in 2005, he prefers to work in a capacity that allows him to interact directly with the public, and so he decided it was time to move on.

"My father said, 'Get out if you don't love what you're doing.' That's an important lesson for everyone here," said Cohon. Cohon's father, George, is a prominent philanthropist and businessman in the Toronto community.

Throughout his talk, Cohon repeatedly recognized his family's role in pushing him forward to achieve his own success.

"We have a saying in our family called roots



Mark Cohon, 44, worked with Major League Baseball and the National Basketball Association before becoming the Canadian Football League commissioner. [Photo courtesy of CFL]

It's now safe to say that Cohon loves his job as CFL commissioner.

"I enjoy waking up and thinking about the challenges I have with my job," he said.

Coming into the CFL at a time when it was suffering with instability and a poor media image, Cohon worked hard to turn things around. Since he became a CFL commissioner, he has seen skyrocketing television ratings for CFL games and the first Grey Cup game in Toronto in 15 years.

Outside of work, Cohon serves as chair of the Ontario Science Centre and sits on the board of the World Wildlife Fund of Canada.

Cohon also founded Youth Challenge International (YCI) in 1984, a charity devoted to global youth development. Though he no longer sits on the board of YCI, he fondly recalled his first mission with them as one of his greatest learning experiences. The mission was an expedition he led to the Canadian and Russian Arctic, allowing Canadian and Russian youth to work together on environmental and cultural projects.

"It really taught me about two things," said Cohon of his experience organizing the Arctic expedition. "Taking a risk... but also getting the right people on the bus."

Cohon's parting words urged audience members to start making career networks and to work on their interactive skills.

"You have to start young, and you have to meet those people who can get you in the right places," he said.

It was the second time audience member Josh Rosen, 22, saw Cohon speak, and he came away newly enthused. A recent University of Toronto graduate with an interest in the business side of sports, Rosen said that Cohon's speech taught him some important lessons.

"The big things are approach anybody and shoot for the moon," he said.

For more information about upcoming JUMP events, please visit www.jumponline.ca.



Mark Cohon, center, with the Calgary Stampeders when the team won the Western Division football championship in November 2008. [Photo courtesy of CFL]

Before joining the CFL as commissioner in 2007, Cohon, 44, worked as the director of corporate and game development with Major League Baseball and as vice-president of business development with the National Basketball Association.



Second from left is Mark Cohon and with him, from left, are JUMP staff members Aaron Glaser, Shlomo Buzaglo, Shira Webber, Debbie Osiel and Shoshana Allen. [Photo courtesy of JUMP]

and wings," he said. "You give your kids the foundation to build their life upon and the wings to grow."

Cohon and his wife, Suzanne, are busy providing roots and wings for their four-year-old daughter, Parker.