

# The World of Vic Swyden

For Victor F. Swyden, involvement is a way of life. He thrives on being wrapped up in half a dozen projects at the same time. Holding first claim on his enthusiasm and confident skill are those activities aimed at serving others. As a volunteer organizer, promoter and executive, he has given leadership to religious, educational, civic and health endeavors, usually working quietly in the background. He has been involved in such service for more than two decades.

Last spring he emerged more prominently in the public eye of his community, having won election to the City Council of his native Kansas City in April. Although long active in civic affairs, he was making his first bid for public office. Vic's reputation for getting things done efficiently undoubtedly was a factor in his success at the polls.

Vic Swyden showed strong signs of leadership in his University days. Influential in student politics, he was vice-president of the Campus Caucus. A member of Blue Key and the Men's Pan-hellenic, he was president of Lambda Chi Alpha and chairman of a Homecoming decorations committee. He also was on the Dean's Honor List. A few years ago he returned to the campus to be initiated into Omicron Delta Kappa as an honorary member. Vic received two degrees from the University, an A. B. in 1938 and a B. S. in Business Administration in 1939.

A glance at some of Vic's responsibilities gives an idea of the range of his interests: President, Heart of America Eye Clinic, which raises and supervises funds to aid people in operations to restore eyesight; director, National Conference of Christians and Jews, Council of Churches for Greater Kansas City, Multiple Sclerosis Chapter of Kansas City; member, International Relations for the City of Kansas City. At present he is chairman of the Board of Trustees of ALSAC (Aiding Leukemia Stricken American Children), an office that can be regarded as honorary now, but he earned it by yeoman service as first vice-president when he helped to spearhead the organization's gigantic fund-raising drives that led to establishing St. Jude Research Hospital in Memphis, Tenn. That is another story, which will be taken up later in this account.

Returning to Kansas City after earning his two University degrees, Vic became active in the Midwest Federation of American Syrian Lebanon Clubs. His local club drafted him as a delegate to the convention in Peoria, Ill., in 1939 and in the next two years he served on various committees, became second vice-president and first vice-president. Then came the war. After two years in the Army he was transferred to the Air Corps at Patterson Field, Dayton. He joined the Seventh Bomber Command of the Seventh Air Force in the Pacific Theater and was director of personnel for the command. While in the Pacific he received the bronze star for distinguished service. Upon his re-

lease from active duty to reserve status, he was a major.

After four and a half years in the service, Vic had returned home to join his father (who came to this country from Lebanon to attend the University of Illinois) and his brother (Hancey Swyden, B.J. '37) in the firm of Swyden Rug and Drapery Company. Vic plunged into community activities, joining the Junior Chamber of Commerce and holding virtually every office of that organization. He served on the Mayor's committee for special projects and had an active role in bringing major league baseball to Kansas City. He became president of the University of Missouri Alumni Association of Greater Kansas City. At Indianapolis in 1946 he was elected the eighth president of the Midwest Federation of American Syrian Lebanon Clubs, presiding at the convention in Cleveland.

It was Vic's interest in the Syrian Lebanese clubs that led directly to the greatest public service involvement of his life—the founding of St. Jude Hospital. First, he saw the scattered independent clubs formed into a cohesive group with a positive national objective. Then he met Danny Thomas, the dedicated entertainer with the magic to rally throngs of supporters to his long range goal. Vic was in on the ground floor when, in 1957, the constitution of ALSAC was drawn up. At that time ALSAC stood for American Lebanese Syrian Associated Charities. The purposes included: "To raise funds for the maintenance of St. Jude Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, a national institution dedicated to the care, cure, and research of leukemia and related blood diseases in children, and care, cure, and research in of all other diseases afflicting mankind; to foster and promote among Arabic speaking people and others, civic, historic, patriotic, and benevolent activities; to aid and assist in charitable causes without regard to race, creed, or color."

The name of ALSAC was changed to crystallize the organization's specific purpose: it became Aiding Leukemia Stricken American Children. Danny Thomas of Beverly Hills was the first—and permanent—president. Dr. Charles Malik, Lebanon's minister to the United Nations, became the honorary president. Vic Swyden was the vice-president and chairman of the board—which meant that he was charged with the heavy work of getting national fund-raising drives on the road.

How Danny Thomas got involved in this fabulous project is a familiar story by now. He was almost penniless in 1937 when he stopped in a Detroit church and found a pamphlet on St. Jude Thaddeus, one of the lesser known saints who was called the patron saint of hopeless causes. Thomas prayed to St. Jude: "Help me find my place in life and I will build you a shrine, a shrine where the poor, the help-



*Their leadership crowned by success, Danny Thomas and Victor F. Swyden congratulate each other at formal opening of St. Jude Hospital in Memphis, Tenn., on February 4, 1962.*



*An old family friend, AP Columnist Hal Boyle, was the principal speaker at a dinner of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, of which Vic Swyden is Protestant chairman.*



*Mr. and Mrs. Swyden with their son, Victor II. The Swydens also have two daughters, Patricia and Janice.*

## Vic Swyden *continued*

less and the hopeless may come for comfort and aid."

Soon thereafter the comedian began his well-known three-year run at the old Chicago 5100 club, and he continued to prosper. But he never lost sight of his pledge to St. Jude, and he sought counsel on what kind of shrine to undertake. It was the late Samuel Cardinal Stritch who suggested the hospital; he also chose Memphis as the location, for it was there that the Cardinal had begun his career as a young parish priest.

As the fund-raising campaign got under way, Thomas began his countless trips across the country meeting with groups and giving benefits. He was often accompanied by Vic Swyden who, in these campaigning years, was in the thick of organizing and directing the activities that would bring the hospital project to reality. By the summer of 1958 three-fourths of the originally estimated cost of two million dollars had been raised; but the cost had increased to nearly five million dollars, and ultimately to six million. This money was raised, and the magnificent hospital at Memphis was opened in February, 1962. Our man Swyden, you can be sure, was there, along with Thomas and scores of leaders in the mammoth drive from all around the country.

While legally independent, St. Jude Hospital is academically and professionally in collaboration with the College of Medicine of the University of Tennessee, where ALSAC endowed a \$300,000 chair of pediatrics and made funds available for research. When the hospital opened, the work and equipment of research fellows, technicians and medical students at U.T., financed by ALSAC funds, moved into the hospital.

It takes \$1,500,000 a year to operate the hospital—which has no accounts receivable. ALSAC chapters across the land have pledged to raise among themselves a million dollars a year—forever—to maintain St. Jude Hospital. Teenagers through their volunteer efforts provide a substantial amount for maintenance. Sixty beds are in use at the hospital now, 150 will be in use ultimately. A child admitted to the hospital may be accompanied by an adult, expenses paid, and they occupy an apartment where simulated family life is possible. Medicines for treatment of leukemia are made available in shipments from the hospital. A heavy program of research is going on constantly.

Considering all his activities, one is entitled to wonder how Vic is able to do so many things. His stock answer is that he has a circle of friends, going back to his Junior C. of C. and war service days, who form a sort of mutual aid society. He can call on any of them to give him a lift, and in turn he is ready to help them. This no doubt is true, but it doesn't explain all his accomplishments. He's still in there working. As Watt Randall, executive secretary of the Kansas City Rotary Club, put it: "Vic is one of our standbys. He's a worker. He gets along won-

derfully well with people. If he can do something for someone, he doesn't hesitate. He's carved a niche for himself in the Rotary Club." As entertainment chairman for the club, Vic is in charge of the annual picnic for the large group. He also heads a bowling league and serves on various committees. He has been active in the club's program of working with high school students who are potential dropouts.

His interest in sports, stemming from his University days, continues. Vic is coach of a team in the 3 and 2 league—boys from 12 to 14 years old. At Missouri he was on the football squad, but was too light to earn a letter; however, he made the varsity baseball team, but a hand injury cut short his career. He is a member of the University Committee on Intercollegiate Athletics.

When Vic gets into something it isn't for a short span. For example, he spent three years with Danny Thomas in spearheading the ALSAC drive; he has been a director of National Conference of Christians and Jews for eight years, and Protestant chairman for three years. (He likes to recall that in that organization Jews thought he was Catholic, Catholics thought he was a Jew, and Protestants didn't know what to think; he is an Episcopalian and a Mason).

Despite the heavy demands on his time, with Vic Swyden his family comes first. His wife is the former Vivian Farha of Detroit. They have a son and two daughters: Victor II, 14; Pat, 12; and Jan, 8. Young Vic elected to compete on the baseball team coached by his father, which may have been asking for trouble, for as Coach Vic says: "I rode Vic awfully hard." Coaches of the league chose the youngster as the most valuable player. When young Vic was laid up with a broken arm, the fathers of the players paid him a call. Coach Vic thought this was an unusual gesture, maybe too much. One of the fathers explained: "We felt that every bawling out Vic got, he was taking it for our sons. Instead of our boys getting bawled out, young Vic had to take it." Coach Vic now wonders if he overdid it.

Young Vic weighs 140 pounds—15 more than his dad weighed when he made the baseball varsity at M.U. His dad thinks the youngster has a future in baseball. The boy was a straight A student until the arm fracture and accompanying low spirits took him down to B's and C's—but he went back toward A's after promising his dad he would do so.

If you ask Vic Swyden how he became involved in so many projects he answers, "I guess I couldn't say no." Then he adds, more seriously: "I like to contribute what I can as long as it's worth while and justified. There's a certain amount one owes his community. We're not here to take everything. The only way to give it back is to participate."

Watt Randall struck some key words in his comment on Vic Swyden: "If he can do something for someone, he doesn't hesitate."