

# How To Make a Difference

## A Mission of Caring

An Interview with Professor Rivka Carmi, M.D.,  
President, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

**EDITORS' NOTE** With her election in 2006, President Rivka Carmi made history by becoming the first woman to head an Israeli university. This came only a few years after she became the first female dean of an Israeli medical school. She has held a number of senior administrative positions, including Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences; Director of the Genetics Institute at the Soroka University Medical Center in Beer-Sheva; and Chairperson of the Israeli Association of Medical Deans. Carmi's research focuses on medical genetics, particularly the delineation of clinical manifestations and molecular basis of genetic diseases in the Negev Arab-Bedouin population. She has identified 12 new genes; delineated three new syndromes, and established a model of community outreach that bridges the distance between clinical research and preventative health care, for which she has been recognized with a number of international honors, including the Award for Peace from the Canada International Scientific Exchange Program (CISEPO) and Hadassah's 2008 Women of Distinction Award.



Rivka Carmi

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (<http://web.bgu.ac.il/Eng/Home>) is a major center for teaching and research, with campuses in Beer-Sheva, Sede Boqer, and Eilat. Some 20,000 students are enrolled in the Faculties of Engineering Sciences, Health Sciences, Natural Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, the Guilford Glazer School of Business and Management, and the Kreitman School of Advanced Graduate Studies. The University also houses major research institutes, including the National Institute for Biotechnology in the Negev, the Isle Katz Institute for Nanoscale Science and Technology, the Jacob Blaustein Institutes for Desert Research (BIDR), and the Ben-Gurion Research Institute for the Study of Israel and Zionism.

**As Israel's youngest research university, BGU has had a major impact on the development of the Negev region. For our readers who are not familiar with the region or the University, what do you think they should know?**

The University was created by a government decision in 1969 as a center for higher education to bring development to the Negev desert, an area that includes some 60 percent of the country's land-mass but less than 10 percent of its population. This

was a direct result of Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's vision. He believed that science and technology could be harnessed to "make the desert bloom." This ethos has infused the University with a special pioneering atmosphere, attracting students, staff, and faculty who are committed to making the extra effort to reach out and help others, through volunteer work, community activism and focused research projects with very real applications.

**What return, if any, does the University derive from this investment in the community?**

We are not looking for a financial return, but one in human potential. One of our most successful outreach programs is called the Open Apartments, in which students live in disadvantaged neighborhoods and work with the local population. They operate mini-community centers, reaching out to all the residents of the neighborhood. We have found that this personal touch has the ability to change people's lives.

And this dialogue works in both directions – the community benefits from all of these different programs, but there is an added value for our students who are enriched by their experiences of helping others. I see this as one of our most important goals – to educate students to be socially aware while nurturing their leadership skills. No matter how you look at it, it is a win-win situation.

**You have described BGU's future goals, "to become a world leader in strategic research areas such as water, alternative energies, and biotechnology, as well as taking a leadership role in global health and medicine." How do you envision making this a reality?**

Finding the right people, which means we are putting a great deal of energy and resources into attracting the very best and most promising researchers to our University in these and other fields that range from Hebrew literature to water resources management. Together, with the help of a number of funds created specifically for this purpose – including from the Government of Israel – we have succeeded in bringing outstanding young researchers in certain strategic fields to the Negev. We are also fostering research cooperation with the private sector, particularly in applied technologies, to help realize the full potential of our research programs.

**You've noted that BGU is a "worldwide leader in the areas of solar energy, water**

**research, and sustainable desert living." How would you best describe BGU's programs in these areas?**

The Jacob Blaustein Institutes for Desert Research (BIDR) have been recognized by the United Nations and many other international agencies for their groundbreaking work in these fields. We are now in the process of planning our third international conference focused on deserts, drylands, and desertification, which is held under the auspices of UNESCO. Each conference attracts over 400 people from countries around the world who are interested in learning more about topics related to sustainability.

One of our priorities is to promote regional cooperation through scientific collaboration. The Albert Katz International School for Desert Studies at the BIDR attracts students from around the world, including Jordanians and Palestinians. This is particularly important in environmental issues that affect the quality of life for all the residents of the region.

**What are the best reasons why the readers of LEADERS Magazine should want to contribute to and become involved with BGU and its programs in coming years?**

In 2007, *The New York Times* commentator Tom Friedman compared the innovation of students at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev to "oil wells that don't run dry." He had made a visit to the University as a guest of Israeli hi-tech entrepreneur and visionary Yossi Vardi, who has been championing the work being done by BGU students of engineering for a number of years. International industrial giants such as Deutsche Telekom, ExxonMobil, Intel, and Oracle support research at BGU, capitalizing on what Friedman described as "tapping the power in imagination."

We have recently partnered with KUD International and the Municipality of Beer-Sheva to create an Advanced Technologies Park adjacent to the University. Its goal is to leverage the research and development infrastructure of the University and Soroka University Medical Center and create the tipping point, which will result in a true transformation of the region. The Israel Defense Forces will move their elite communications and computer units to the ATP, which will serve as an anchor to attract other related companies.

I invite all of the readers of LEADERS Magazine to come visit and see for themselves how we have made the desert "bloom with innovation," and learn more about how we are working to spread this knowledge and experience to the world. ●