

## Game Changers

### An Interview with Adrienne Arsht

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Adrienne Arsht is a business leader and impact philanthropist who takes an active role in spearheading and supporting programs and initiatives that are game changers. In the arts, her donations include the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts of Miami-Dade County, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts Adrienne Arsht Theater Fund, Lincoln Center's Adrienne Arsht Stage in Alice Tully Hall, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art*



Adrienne Arsht

*METLIVEARTS performance series. Arsht funded the creation of fully paid internship programs at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts in Miami and the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. With her gift, The Met is the country's single largest art museum offering 100 percent paid internships to nearly 120 undergraduate and graduate interns each year.*

*The topic of resilience inspired her donations to the Smithsonian Institution to launch the Adrienne Arsht Community-Based Resilience Solutions Initiative, a multi-year program to research tropical resilience and educate the public about the role resilience plays in shaping the world around us. Arsht also spearheaded the creation of the Adrienne Arsht Center for Resilience at the Atlantic Council, renamed the Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center, with the \$30 million Rockefeller Foundation gift that she matched.*

*She endowed the creation of the Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center at the Atlantic Council which focuses on the role of Latin America and the Caribbean in the trans-Atlantic community.*

*She is a Trustee of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Honorary Trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Trustee Emerita of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and of the University of Miami; Executive Vice Chairman of the Atlantic Council, and a member of the National Advisory Board of the Sandra Day O'Connor Institute for American Democracy, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, former President of the Vice President's Residence Foundation and a former Board Member of the Blair House Restoration Fund. Arsht is Chairman Emerita of TotalBank, for which she served as Chairman of the Board growing the bank to over \$1.4 billion in assets and sold to Banco Popular Español in 2007.*

*The Chronicle of Philanthropy ranked Arsht number 32 on its 2022 America's biggest donors list, and Worth Magazine named her as one of the Worthy 100 of 2022.*

*A graduate of Villanova Law School, she moved to New York City and joined the legal department of Trans World Airlines (TWA) and became the first woman in the company's property, cargo, and government relations departments. She is the daughter of The Honorable Roxana Cannon Arsht, the first*

*female judge in the State of Delaware, and S. Samuel Arsht, a prominent Wilmington attorney. Arsht is a graduate of Mount Holyoke College. Upon graduation from Villanova Law School, Arsht was the 11th woman admitted to the Delaware bar – her mother having been the 5th. She was married to the late Myer Feldman (d.2007), former counsel to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.*

#### **Was the concept of philanthropy instilled in you early in life?**

Yes, I learned from both my parents at an early age about being active in the community and that philanthropy is about making a difference and doing something others might not take on.

#### **How do you decide where to focus your philanthropic efforts and what do you look for when evaluating giving opportunities?**

I aim for gifts that can be "game changers." I often will decide to support something if nobody else seems to want to do it. The Adrienne Arsht Foundation will be created upon my death, encompassing my entire estate. I have asked a few friends to oversee the donations and spend out the fund. I have said to them, "Give based on my spirit and the things I care about," and use their judgment based on the current needs.

As in so many things, my parents are my model. My parents left their entire estate including their house and its contents to the newly created Arsht Cannon Fund in Delaware. Their only stipulation was that its grants must be used in Delaware.



Adrienne Arsht with her parents, Roxana Cannon Arsht, Samuel Arsht, and Justice Sandra Day O'Connor



*Adrienne Arsht at the dedication of the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts in Miami*

At first that mandate was difficult for me, because I didn't live in Delaware anymore. I didn't know the needs, and I really struggled.

Ultimately, I decided to focus on the Hispanic population in Delaware. My parents' fund now supports literacy programs, bilingual services, and mentorship organizations. I did that because I was familiar with the Hispanic community from my time living in Florida, and because the immigrant experience was part of my parents' story.

**What led to your interest in the study of resilience and the creation of the Adrienne Arsht Resilience Center?**

A large part of my interest in resilience was prompted by the suicide of my sister, Alison. She was two years younger than I, and in 1969 at the age of 25, she was in the Soviet Union as a foreign-service officer. She was arrested by the KGB. They released her the next day, and she was able to get to the U.S. Embassy and was then flown to Washington, DC. The "evidence" against her was an altered taped conversation that was a set up by the Russians. Alison came back shattered. Today, we might recognize it as PTSD, but then there was little knowledge of what she was experiencing and how to help. She committed suicide when she was 29. We now know, Alison was one of the first to be set up by the Russians. Years later others like Nicholas Daniloff of *U.S. News and World Report* and *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich had comparable experiences. And so, I wondered, how two siblings similarly raised could have different reasons to live or die.

When I founded the Adrienne Arsht Center for Resilience in 2016, it was to study resilience in many areas: financial systems, infrastructure, the human body, emotional and psychological resilience, disaster recovery, military training, immigrant, and refugee survival. A large part of resilience is preparing in advance for future challenges. In 2019, I matched a gift from the Rockefeller Foundation

to endow the Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Resilience Center. Arsht-Rock is a leader in identifying, implementing, and scaling solutions to the urgent crises of climate change, heat, and migration.



*Adrienne Arsht at the Atlantic Council*

Last year, I gave the initial funding to the Smithsonian Institution to launch the Adrienne Arsht Community-Based Resilience Solutions Initiative. This contribution will fund a multi-year project to study resilience and sustainability connecting complex tropical systems and the people who depend on them. The funding will further programs focused on resilience across the entire Smithsonian, and a virtual tour focused on resilience-themed objects and stories throughout the Smithsonian system.

**What was your vision for developing the Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center and how do you define its mission?**

The bank I purchased in Miami, TotalBank, was founded by Cuban Americans and Spaniards, and most of the clients were Hispanic. That experience of working in the Hispanic community made me increasingly interested in our neighbors to the South. It's a very ignored part of the world, and I'm trying to change that.

When I moved back to DC in 2008 after selling TotalBank, it became immediately clear to me that there was a need to find a way to integrate the interests of Latin America with Europe and the United States to shape the global future and create a broad community of common values. I gave \$10 million ten years ago to establish the Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center at the Atlantic Council. This Center created a Council dedicated to forging an effective role between Latin America and the Caribbean in the transatlantic community.



*Adrienne Arsht in front of the Adrienne Arsht Stage in Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center*

**Were you always attracted to the arts, and will you discuss your many philanthropic projects supporting the arts?**

My passion for the performing arts comes from my parents and I think it is part of the human DNA. There was always music in the house. My mother played the piano. I took piano and ballet lessons. Every Saturday we would listen on the radio to the Texaco live broadcast of the Metropolitan Opera. I was fortunate to go to theater in Wilmington, Delaware, and New York City to experience Broadway. I cannot imagine a world without the arts. When giving to the arts, you are preserving the essence of civilization for now and for hundreds of years to come. It is thrilling to know that a gift to the arts will be shared by people in a future we can't even imagine. The arts are part of who we are and helps define us. They have been treasured for centuries and will continue indefinitely.

Performing Artists are almost by definition resilient. They have a saying, "The show must go on." I spend a lot of time talking to artists, and I like to ask, "Tell me times when the show had to go on." There was Baryshnikov, who smashed his foot during a performance and yet continued partnering the ballerina until the act ended. Jean-Yves Thibaudet, the great French pianist, was performing when the piano started to move across the stage. The stagehands had forgotten to lock the wheels. Between movements, Jean-Yves got off the piano bench and locked the wheels. Ask your artist friends for their "Show Must Go On" story.

**Will you discuss your recent philanthropic commitment to create an internship program with The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Adrienne Arsht Center in Miami?**

My realization of the necessity to pay interns occurred when I was a child, and my father told me of his experience at the University of Pennsylvania

Law school. My father, S. Samuel Arsht, was a student at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. He excelled academically and was offered a prestigious but unpaid position on the *Law Review*. He could not afford to accept this coveted position because he had to earn money, which he did by hitch-hiking back and forth to Wilmington to teach Hebrew School. An internship should be a stepping-stone to the future, not a barrier to entry.

Paid internships are an important step toward increasing opportunities and supporting equity. Unpaid internships are barriers for low-income students and people of color who may not be able to afford to work for free. With my gift, The Met is now the single largest art museum in the country to offer 100 percent paid internships to its nearly 120 undergraduate and graduate interns, enhancing access and removing financial barriers to student participation in the program. In April 2022, I announced an endowment gift at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts in Miami to fund fully paid internships creating greater and more equal access to hands-on professional experience in arts management and administration.

**Why has it been so important for you to attach your name to your philanthropic projects?**

Putting your name on something lets the world know what matters to you. By making a naming gift you take a stand, you show other people what you support. When I get a solicitation from any charity, I always look up the board members. You want to see who believes in the organization, and when you see it's somebody you respect, someone whose core values you share, that tells you something about that organization.

My gift to save the performing arts center in Miami told the community, "Take a second look." The performing arts center was considered a white



*Adrienne Arsht at the Smithsonian for the announcement of the Adrienne Arsht Community-Based Resilience Solutions Initiative in October 2022*

elephant at the time. It had been a financial sink-hole since it opened, but when I made my gift, the energy in the organization changed. We hired new management and turned the center around.

The land for the Arsht Center was in an underdeveloped section of the city. It's hard to imagine now, but institutions like Lincoln Center, the Metropolitan Museum, and the Kennedy Center were also built in places that nobody else wanted. The Arsht Center ultimately changed the city. All the surrounding land is now high value. It's the center of activity for people. The apartments in the neighborhood are selling out quickly. Other businesses have bought land in the vicinity. Hotels are coming up in the neighborhood. It revitalized downtown Miami. In the 16 years since my involvement, the Center

has generated more than \$10 billion in local economic impact. A performing arts complex offers an extraordinary value to a city. It brings the arts in their many forms to every one of every generation and every interest. The Arsht Center is a perfect example and has played a key role in the resurgence and transformation of the immediate area, the city of Miami, and beyond.

**Do you think men and women approach giving differently?**

Absolutely! Men know that they will always have lots more money to give and use. Women fear/believe that they will end up “bag” ladies. They temper their giving based on this. For the record, I too am afraid of being a bag lady, but I am fulfilling my “pledge” to give all my money away.



**As a leading female in philanthropy, what do you tell other women about the importance of giving?**

If you want to have a place at the table where decisions are made, you need to earn that place. That is done by contributions whether philanthropic, political or otherwise. It's the old saying, “put your money where your mouth is.”

Women shy away from recognition for their philanthropy. They seek anonymity. I want to set an example for women so they know it's ok to give, and the value of giving and putting your name on causes in which you believe. I hope that my actions are respected and in turn will inspire them to give.

**What does success mean to you?**

I've often said that success and courage are two terms which one rarely applies to oneself. Other people give you those characteristics. I define success as losing 3 pounds.

**When you think of legacy, is the impact that you have made on countless lives through your philanthropic work what means the most to you?**

I want to be remembered as a good friend and someone who had courage. My mother was compared to Joan of Arc – someone willing to die for a cause. I hope that I would do the same.

**Are you able to enjoy the process and take moments to reflect on your accomplishments?**

Not really – that takes time away from moving forward. ●



*Adrienne Arsht selling lemonade with her sister Alison (above);  
Adrienne Arsht with her father, Samuel Arsht – climbing a ladder as a little girl (top right)*