

## Building Relationships

An Interview with Joan H. Weill

**EDITORS' NOTE** Joan Weill has been Chair of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Foundation since 2000. The Joan Weill Center for Dance at Alvin Ailey, completed in 2005, is the nation's largest facility dedicated to dance. Weill is the past Chair of Paul Smith's College, having spearheaded the college's transition from a two-year to four-year institution. She is also Co-Chair of the Advisory Committee of the Weill Music Institute at Carnegie Hall and serves on the board of advisors for the Green Music Center at Sonoma



Joan H. Weill

State University. Weill's dedication to women's health issues led to her appointment as Co-Chair of the New York Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center's Women's Health Symposium. She is also an Honorary Board Member and President Emerita of Citymeals-on-Wheels. Weill's personal commitment to public service also extends to many of the activities in which her husband, Sandy, is involved, including the National Academy Foundation (NAF), Weill Cornell Medical College, and the New York-Presbyterian Hospital, where she serves on the Executive Committee of their Lying-In Hospital. Weill is a graduate of Brooklyn College with a bachelor's degree in elementary education. Together, Joan and Sandy were recipients of the prestigious 2009 Carnegie Medal of Philanthropy Award.

**Was the importance of giving back instilled in you very early on? With so much need, how did you decide which areas to invest in?**

My father was a press agent. We didn't have a lot of money but he was very creative and he thought of ways to raise money for various benefits, so I was exposed to that growing up.

I was active, as was my mother – who passed away this past February at the age of 100½ – so when my kids were growing up, I joined the PTA. When they got older, I searched for something to do that I could call my own.

I went to work at Bellevue Psychiatric ward and I took a course and loved it. I was there for a few years and that was very rewarding.

When my husband, Sandy, was at American Express, the head of the company's foundation told me that Gael Greene and James Beard were starting an organization called Citymeals-On-Wheels. A year after they started it, I really got involved. I was very attached to a grandparent so this fit in with my interests. I always participated in social service, so working with the elderly was great for me.

**When you and Sandy get involved in projects, you make a long-term commitment. How important is that to making a real impact?**

It's very important. I like the challenge of building something and that takes time. I learned a lot from Citymeals-on-Wheels on how to raise consciousness. It was a good learning experience. I have been at Alvin Ailey for 20 years now and I often joke that I could be the only great grandmother to be Chairman. But there comes a point when you need younger people to come in with fresh ideas.

**How did you get involved in Alvin Ailey and the areas of specialty around arts and education that have been so close to your heart?**

I was very involved in social service organizations; Sandy used to say that he covered culture and I covered the streets. But I had seen Judith Jamison (Artistic Director Emerita, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater) perform when I was a teenager and not only her dance, but also her charisma and her presence as a woman impressed me.

I knew some people on the board and, at that time, the organization was going through some troubles. A friend of ours invited us to the Apollo to see the group perform. Some of the people I knew on the board saw the enthusiasm that I had that evening so they invited me to join the board and I said I would only do so if I got to meet Miss Jamison beforehand.

It was important to me that their activities encompassed the social service aspect because behind the footlights, we run AileyCamp, we support arts and education, and community outreach, so it brought everything that I love together.

**Many companies today link their community efforts with their business strategies and support for the arts is not always at the forefront. How worried are you that young people will lose the opportunity for introduction to the arts?**

That's why we keep trying to raise awareness. We recently held a gala at the Apollo to raise scholarship funds for young people to experience dance. It's scary with all the schools closing and we need everything we can get. We can't count as much on corporate foundations as we have in the past, but fortunately, individuals have been making up for that, which is fulfilling and encouraging to see. I think it is also important to emphasize that philanthropy is not about just writing a check – it's about

donating one's time, energy, and experience to the causes one is passionate about.

**How important is it to track the impact of your efforts and is it difficult to do so?**

It's expensive to measure impact and it is challenging. We have been able to keep track of the kids at AileyCamp and to follow up with them, and now we have them coming back during the winter. They recently performed at the gala, which was terrific to see. These kids are not picked for talent – they are at-risk kids. So we try to track them but it's not always easy.

**You've also been involved with New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center regarding women's issues. Why is that work so important?**

It has been very rewarding. We have a Women's Health Center and the doctor in charge of it, Dr. Orli Etingin, who also started it, works closely with me on the Women's Health Symposium.

There are about 350 women who come to Citigroup once a year to bring attention to women's needs in medicine; we get great, cutting-edge doctors and it's very educational. This year, our focus is sex, sleep, and stress.

It's gratifying to see that the women we are attracting are getting younger because women are the ones that support the whole family in terms of health. So they have to take care of themselves.

**You and Sandy have made a major commitment in Sonoma. How did that come about?**

We're focused on a music center that got stuck because of the economy; they've been trying to build it for 12 years. They finished the music center but the lobby wasn't finished and the surrounding grounds weren't done. But it's a gem and has the potential to be a cultural destination. We asked Lang Lang (Founder, Lang Lang International Music Foundation) to come to see it and he was blown away with how exceptional the sound is. Lang Lang will be performing at the Grand Opening on September 29th.

It's at Sonoma State University with a music school so there is an educational component to it. It's also great for the community economically and culturally.

**Through all the craziness of life and business with Sandy, you have built friendships that seem to last forever. Is that just in your nature?**

Ninety-nine percent of the people we work with, I would have chosen as friends. I'm still friends with people we were in business with 30 years ago. Relationships are what it's all about. ●