

Transformative Philanthropy

An Interview with Adrienne Arsht

EDITORS' NOTE *Adrienne Arsht is a business leader and impact philanthropist. She has taken a leading role promoting artistic, business and civic growth in the three cities she calls home: Washington, D.C., Miami and New York. Her \$30 million contribution to Miami's Performing Arts Center in 2008 secured its financial footing. In her honor, the Center was renamed the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts of Miami-Dade County. In 2012, her*



Adrienne Arsht

contribution of \$10 million to Lincoln Center was recognized with the dedication of the Adrienne Arsht Stage in Alice Tully Hall. In Washington, D.C. in 2016, Arsht spearheaded the creation of the Adrienne Arsht Center for Resilience at The Atlantic Council, which has just been renamed the Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center with the \$30 million Rockefeller Foundation gift that she matched. She also founded the Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center at the Atlantic Council in 2013 to focus on the role of South America in the transatlantic community. She is a Trustee of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts where she established the Adrienne Arsht Theater Fund. Arsht is a Vice Chairman of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, and Executive Vice Chairman of the Atlantic Council. She is on the Trustees Council of The National Gallery of Art and a Board Member of the Blair House Restoration Fund. She is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and is former President of the Vice President's Residence Foundation. At the request of the then Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, Arsht created the campaign Patrons of Diplomacy to establish an endowment for the preservation of furniture and works of art for the State Department. She is Trustee Emerita of the University of Miami and an honorary board member of Amigos for Kids. In 2019, Arsht was inducted as an honorary member of the Beta Gamma Sigma society by the business school at Georgetown University. She received an honorary degree from her alma mater, Mount Holyoke College. Recently, Arsht was awarded The Order of Rio Branco from the Brazilian government for her outstanding dedication to U.S.-Brazil relations and her vision toward Latin America. In

2017, she was bestowed the Carnegie Hall Medal of Excellence recognizing her visionary and exceptional contributions to cultural and nonprofit institutions nationally. She is the only woman to have ever received this distinction. Additionally, Arsht was awarded the distinguished Order of San Carlos of Colombia, which was given to her by the direction of Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos. In 2013, she was presented with the prestigious diplomatic honor, Orden de Isabel la Católica (Order of

the Cross of Isabella the Catholic) from The King of Spain. A 1966 graduate of Villanova Law School, Arsht began her Delaware law career with Morris, Nichols, Arsht & Tunnel. In 1969, she moved to New York City and joined the legal department of Trans World Airlines (TWA). She then became the first woman in the company's property, cargo and government relations departments. Arsht moved to Washington, D.C. in 1979 where she initially worked with a law firm, then started her own title company. In 1996, she moved to Miami to run her family-owned bank, TotalBank. From 1996 to 2007, Arsht served as Chairman of the Board. Under her leadership, TotalBank grew from four to fourteen locations with over \$1.4 billion in assets. In 2007, she sold the bank to Banco Popular Español. In 2008, she became the first, and still is, the only woman to join the Five Million Dollar Roundtable of United Way of Miami-Dade. Arsht's other notable gifts include to Goucher College, creating the Roxana Cannon Arsht Center for Ethics and Leadership, in honor of her late mother, a Goucher graduate, The University of Miami Arsht Ethics Programs, and a lab at Bascom Palmer Eye Institute of the University of Miami. In Delaware, Arsht funded the creation of a Best Buddies chapter to specifically serve Hispanics and African Americans with mental disabilities. The Chronicle of Philanthropy ranked Arsht number 39 on its 2008 America's biggest donors list. She is the daughter of the Honorable Roxana Cannon Arsht, the first female judge in the State of Delaware, and Samuel Arsht, a prominent Wilmington attorney. Upon graduation from Villanova Law School, Arsht was the 11th woman admitted to the Delaware bar – her mother having been the 5th.

How did you get started in philanthropy?

When I was a child, we had an annual family meeting where we always made end-of-the-year gifts. My mother, father, sister and I would sit down and decide where we wanted the money to go. We each, theoretically, had one vote per person, but my father really ended up exercising three-and-a-half of them, but there was no controversy. In our family, we learned early on that philanthropy was the basis of the reason for you to exist, which is to care for others at all times.

My family made transformative gifts to hospitals and senior education at the University of Delaware through the Academy of Lifelong Learning. That was one of the first concepts of education for older people at a university. It's very prominent as a building and as an institution. Philanthropy really defines who we are as human beings. That was where it started.

Are the skills required to run a successful philanthropic enterprise similar to those that are necessary to run a successful business?

I don't know how you correlate them. I'm sometimes asked how I do things. If I see it and I think it needs to be done, I just go for it. I have personal cards that have a Kurt Vonnegut quote on them that says, "Jump and develop your wings on the way down," because if I ever thought of all the reasons something wouldn't work, I'd never do anything. I've never focused on business principles in my philanthropic work. I'm a lawyer, but I went to law school because I thought it would teach me the best way to think – concise and logical. I never wanted to practice law, but I wanted to focus on how one thinks. This was in the mid '60s when women certainly weren't studying law. I felt that being a lawyer would give me enough credibility so that when I walked into a room, at least I had credentials that were comparable to others.

With so much societal need today, how do you focus your philanthropic giving?

As with my parents, I start where I can make an impact in an area that nobody else is interested in.

In 2007, the Performing Arts Center in Miami was about to go bankrupt and nobody believed in it. I knew that Miami was a great

My interest in artists goes way back and the phrase “the show must go on” defines artists. They are resilient and every artist has their own unique story of how they have had to be resilient.

city, but to be a really great city you must have a performing arts center, so I made the \$30 million gift that saved the Center and the City.

Will you discuss your commitment to Miami?

I went to Miami in 1996 and often returned to Washington very enthusiastic about Miami and found that everybody seemed surprised by that. I would say, “Miami is the future today, get used to it.” I felt that then and, of course, it is that today, on a slew of levels.

I’ve always cared about the Hispanic population and the importance of Latin America. When I sold my bank in 2007 and moved back to Washington, D.C., I tried to get some think tanks to care about Latin America. I contacted one and the head of it wouldn’t even see me. He just said, “Oh, go talk to somebody about doing something in the arts.” I went to another one and the head of it said, “Oh,

do something on women’s issues.” It was finally the Atlantic Council and Fred Kempe who took it on. It was an important area that they felt was underserved.

I believed in Miami as a city and I just knew it had to have a performing arts center. I don’t always know what something I support will become. I just know it must be.

It is amazing to see all of the events that are held there now such as the NFL Honors night and the first Democratic Debate taking over the entire Opera House and Concert Hall for two nights. The Opera House is second in size only to the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Would I have ever imagined that? No, but the Center provides the city with the opportunity to host these types of events and so much more.

There is a Secret Service agent who is assigned to one of the ambassadors in Washington who comes to my house frequently.

The agent introduced himself and said he had been based in Miami and that his family was still there. I gave him my box at the Center for his family to use. It gives me crazy joy to be able to do this as it does when I meet somebody who has taken their children to events there. I also hear of artists who perform there talking about the stage and the audience and how they enjoy performing there and that it is a place that mattered to them. This is why I made my gift.

Will you discuss your involvement with Lincoln Center?

When I first came back up to New York after I sold my bank in Miami, I was asked to join the board of the Metropolitan Opera, which is the largest opera company in the world. As such, for me, it provided an excellent learning experience and considerable musical pleasure. Then Katherine Farley, Chair of Lincoln Center, asked me to join that board. I made a \$10 million gift to Lincoln Center and the stage in Alice Tully Hall was named in my honor. It was especially meaningful to have the stage named in Alice Tully Hall as it shows women and men what women can do.

You mentioned your work with the Atlantic Council, which is a big focus for you. Will you highlight this relationship and how your focus on resilience developed?

Resilience is something that I have thought about most of my life. On a personal level, resilience is evolution and survival. My interest in artists goes way back and the phrase “the show must go on” is what artists live by. They are resilient and every artist has their own unique story of how they have had to be resilient.

While performing, Baryshnikov injured his foot but as the saying goes, “the show must go on” and he continued dancing until the curtain dropped. Artists still perform when they are sick. If a prop that is supposed to be there for them isn’t there, they improvise. They go on no matter what.

I had a younger sister who was brilliant. She was a foreign service officer and spoke many languages. She was in the Soviet Union in 1969 at the beginning of the Cold War when she was just in her twenties. She was taken away by the KGB and accused of being a spy. They let her out and when she got back to the United States, she became emotionally depressed and had a breakdown. Eventually, she committed suicide. I’ve always thought about whether we



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

were different and if I would have had a stronger will to survive. I don't know, but we were two people raised in pretty much the same environment so this really made me wonder where resilience comes from.

Then, while I was living in Miami, I had the chance to spend time with the people at the U.S. Southern Command who were talking about military and specifically the Special Forces, Seals, Rangers, and all the special ops and what it takes to be them. This was before bin Laden and before everybody began to know

what a Seal was. If you get through the early training for these forces, are you, by definition, resilient?

Brain injuries are another example of resilience. The brain of resilient people is actually physically different. The same with immune systems. There are some immune systems that are more resilient. Why does somebody die from a disease and somebody else survives?

The Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. has a dinosaur display that was just redone. While dinosaurs were wiped

out by a meteor, they weren't resilient, if you will. Some animals and species are becoming extinct while others evolve. Why are some resilient enough to survive and evolve?

We all talk climate change and while I don't know whose fault it is, I just want us to focus on how we can slow it, then fix it and stop it. Today, drought affects crops like coffee beans and grapes. Some of the most extensive migration out of Africa comes because of this. It's not because of wars, but of the economics of crops no longer being able to be grown.

Another example is the vineyards. Wines from Australia must adapt or they will be wiped out because of the droughts brought on by climate change. The vineyards in France are disappearing because of the weather.

I'm organizing what will be an annual Forum on Global Resilience hosted by The Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center. We are going to have a Last Call Café, which will highlight wines that won't survive and champagne that will now have to come from England.

Working with Walter Reed Hospital on PTSD and brain injury, we look at soldiers who come back and why some of them recover and others don't.

We have another big focus on cultural resilience and how we preserve our culture. Bombs and missiles may have taken out some of the legendary places in the Middle East, but you still have people in refugee camps who can maintain that culture. Whether it's Venezuela, where a third of the population has left, or Syria, where even more have left, the culture, the songs and dance and other cultural elements, can still be passed along. They are resilient because they are carried forward.

You make quick decisions with your philanthropic investments. Will you discuss your approach to giving?

I gently say about myself, which others would probably agree with, that "she doesn't play well with others." I jump and move quickly. It was the same with my parents. There was no structure and no staff. They just decided and wrote checks. On my death, I'm giving away all of my money. I'm not a billionaire but, on my death, everything will go into the Adrienne Arsht Foundation. Until then, I'll just be writing checks.

There are reasons to have large organizations that distribute things. It just doesn't fit for me. I don't have a family office. I'm totally solo from a family standpoint. My parents left money to the Arsht-Cannon Fund, which was set up as a Delaware Community Foundation. This was done so that there was a framework from which to administer it as a foundation. Actually, when I die, somebody will decide whether they need to do the same thing. There are documents that need to be prepared and rules that have to be followed. That's the value of these community foundations. They take care of the paperwork.

Are you focused on increasing the involvement of more women in philanthropy?



Adrienne Arsht at the Atlantic Council standing between the two banners of the Centers that bear her name



Exterior shot of the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts in Miami, Florida

Women know the importance of philanthropy. People tell me, “I don’t have your kind of money.” My response is that it isn’t about the amount. It’s the giving that you do, whether it’s writing a check or donating your time or treasure. There are many things you can do. You should understand that philanthropy is giving where there is a need in any way.

Is my name on things to try to set an example for other women to follow? Yes. When I’m asked to contribute to something or join something, or even be honored by something, I want to know who else is involved. You’re known by the company you keep. Letterhead from charities often include a listing of the board members. I look at that to see if they’re like-minded people, or people whose judgment I respect. If I’m willing to put my name on something, it has to mirror what I stand for. I wish other women would do that. I am focused on more women putting their names on rooms and buildings. Putting your name on something tells people what matters to you.

How did you become engaged in the Kennedy Center?

It is a performing arts center. When I came to Washington, D.C. in 1979, I led an organization for funding new theater at the Kennedy Center. I chaired this organization called Kennedy Center Productions, Inc. I love the arts and the Kennedy Center, The Washington Opera, The National Symphony. I made the decision that I could only do one thing in each city. With my focus on performing art centers, I knew I could probably be the most valuable focusing on that.

Are you able to be in the moment and enjoy the process?

I’m excited when I’m doing something such as a dinner party at my house, but I’m not in the moment because I want to make sure that something wonderful comes of it. Do I have an exhilaration when it’s over because that has happened? Absolutely.

The joy of watching something succeed or people being happy is a great joy. My posse that is with me all the time, often tells me to take a moment. There is a phrase I use that says, “a pessimist has no engine and an optimist has no brake.” I don’t see failure as an option, which

comes back to “jump and develop your wings on the way down.”

Where did your resilience come from?

I believe that you are either resilient or you aren’t. Athletes are wonderful to study, but at any level, when you talk to your kids about sports, it’s always going that extra mile and not giving up. It’s about not quitting. Much of that is genetic, but it can be reinforced.

I say that my mother must have been the child that Joan Arc and Don Quixote would have had. My mother stood for things. She would die for a cause. She was out there for what mattered like Don Quixote tilting at windmills because he believed that he could make a better world.

You have accomplished so much in your life and continue to take on more things. Will you ever slow down?

I don’t think I have a brake. I don’t understand that I’m going fast, nor do I understand why I’d stop. I recently turned 78. I would say I’m never in neutral and that my next challenge is just waiting for me. ●