

The Show Goes On

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, DC, 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 contribution of \$10 million to Lincoln Center was recognized with the dedication of the Adrienne Arsht Stage in Alice Tully Hall.*



Adrienne Arsht

Recently, Arsht donated \$10 million to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in support of the MetLiveArts performance series. This is the single largest gift to the Department of Live Arts and will fund Department activities that uplift and highlight themes of resilience through art.

In October 2022, Arsht donated \$10 million 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.

In April 2022, in Washington DC, Arsht announced a \$25 million gift to endow the Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center at the Atlantic Council. The Center was founded in 2013 to focus on the role of South America in the trans-Atlantic community. In 2016, Arsht spearheaded the creation of the Adrienne Arsht Center for Resilience at the Atlantic Council, which was renamed in 2019 the Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center, with the \$30 million Rockefeller Foundation gift that she matched.

Earlier in 2022, Arsht announced an \$11 million endowment gift at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts in Miami. This gift will support a fully paid internship program creating greater and more equal access to hands-on professional experience in arts management and administration.

Arsht is a Trustee of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts where she established the Adrienne Arsht Theater Fund and

is Trustee Emerita of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. She is an Honorary Trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Arsht is 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. She is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and is former President of the Vice President's Residence Foundation and a former Board Member of the Blair House Restoration Fund. Arsht

is Trustee Emerita of the University of Miami and an honorary board member of Amigos for Kids.

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. Arsht is on the Advisory Council of the DC Volunteer Lawyers Project (DCVLP) where she established the Roxana Cannon Arsht Law Fellowship, in honor of her mother, which focuses on domestic violence and other urgent family matters. She was the inaugural recipient of the DCVLP Champion of Justice Award for her outstanding contributions to the organization's work to expand access to justice.

In 2022, 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. In April 2021, she was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award from the South Florida Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and was the recipient of an Honorary Doctor of Arts degree from Barry University, located in Miami. 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. Arsht was awarded The Order of Rio Branco from the Brazilian government in 2019 for her outstanding dedication to U.S.-Brazil relations and her vision toward Latin America. 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, Arsht

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. 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. In 2006, Arsht received an Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award in finance.

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, DC 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 locations to 14 with over \$1.4 billion in assets. In 2007, she sold the bank to Banco Popular Español. Arsht was named Chairman Emerita of TotalBank.

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.

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. She is a graduate of Mount Holyoke College. She was married to the late Myer Feldman (d.2007), former counsel to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.

What do you see as the keys to effective leadership in the 21st century?

Resilience, Passion, and a Sense of Humor. Resilience is surviving the crisis of the moment, changing the path, and adapting. A sense of humor gives you perspective and keeps you from tipping too far on either side. Passion speaks for itself.

What does quitting mean to you?

I don't think of "quitting" as a negative. Quitting is a chance to adapt to circumstances. The one thing quitting isn't is giving up. It is another word for changing direction and reassessing circumstances. Quitting, like failure, is a teaching moment.

Where did your interest in and passion for the study of resilience develop?

A large part of my interest in resilience came from 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 and was taken by the KGB and accused of spying. The evidence was fake tape recordings. They released her the next day, but she came back shattered. She committed suicide when she was 29. From that I have tried to understand how being from the same family and raised so similarly, how we went on very different paths. Hers to despair and mine to optimism.

Do you feel that resilience can be taught or is it an ability that a person is born with?

Individual resilience is mostly genetic, but it can also be encouraged. You can learn from watching others, and decide, "I'm not going to give up." There are also situations triggered by stress that can cause cell changes. This is called Epigenetics. This aspect of genetics shows how your behavior and environment can cause changes that affect the way your genes work for you as well as for future generations.

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. The Show Goes On for each of us.

Will you discuss some of the experiences in your life when resilience was critical in overcoming challenges?

I often think of living as being like a little stream at the top of a mountain. As you go down, you find rocks or boulders in the way. You don't stop, you just find a way around. I worked at Trans World Airlines in a department where they'd never hired a woman before, and they only hired me because a new law required it. The men would go to lunch every day without me and say, "we may have to work with you, but we don't have to eat with you." They did the same thing at conferences when they all went off to play golf. I didn't want to be left out – this is where the leaders of my industry were. So, I put on a tennis outfit and showed up to drive the golf cart. I just found a way to be where they were.

What has made philanthropy so important to you and how do you approach your philanthropic work?

Philanthropy is part of my everyday existence. For me, the causes I support will be game changers. I learned the importance of philanthropy and making a difference from both my parents. Giving has been a family tradition and has been a core value from the time that I was



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

a little girl. We gathered as a family at the end of each year to discuss the causes we would support.

You are a major supporter of the arts. Why is this your passion?

My passion for the arts comes from my parents. There was always music in the house. My mother played the piano, and I took piano and ballet lessons. Every Saturday we would listen on the radio to the Texaco live broadcast from the Metropolitan Opera. I was fortunate to go to the theater in Wilmington, Delaware and to New York City for shows on 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. Art is part of who we are and helps define us. It has been treasured for centuries and will continue indefinitely.

Why are naming rights important to you as part of your philanthropic giving?

Putting your name on something lets the world know what matters to you. By making a naming gift you take a stand, and you show other people what you support. When I get a solicitation from any charity, I always look up the board members. I want to see who believes in this organization, and when I see it's somebody I respect, someone whose core values I share, that tells me something about that organization. In the case of the Adrienne Arsht Performing Arts Center, my gift told the community, "Take a second look." The performing arts center was considered a white elephant at the time. It had been a financial sinkhole for years. But when I went ahead, the energy in the organization changed. Put your money where your mouth is and lead by example.

What advice do you offer to young people?

Don't give up. Persistence is key – and you may change the world. Don't take the word "no" personally – because it isn't personal. Don't over commit – there is always someone else who can do it. "No" is a complete sentence – except when it isn't. "Yes" is an opportunity – except when it isn't. ●



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