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BENEFACTOR Joan H. Weill, an Alvin Ailey board member and chairwoman.

Dance Devotee Stays in Motion

By ROBIN POGREBIN

GIVEN that she is 77 years old and has been on the board of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for 17 years, 11 as chairwoman, Joan H. Weill clearly does not need to serve any longer. She could simply be enjoying time with her husband, Sanford I. Weill, who recently retired as the head of Citigroup. They could be relaxing at their home in California's wine country or spending more time with their four grandchildren.

But Ms. Weill still has goals to accomplish, including providing housing for Ailey students, given how hard it is for dancers to afford to live in New York. And she is eager to see what Ailey's new artistic director, Robert Battle, who succeeded Judith Jamison in June, will bring as he begins his first season this month.

In turn, the dance company cannot imagine Ailey without Ms. Weill. "When Joan does something, it's with every fiber of her being," said Sharon Gersten Luckman, the executive director of the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, the company's umbrella organization. "So if she left, it would feel like we'd lose our balance. She's that connected. She's that integral to what we do."

Ms. Weill has been crucial to keeping the organization on stable financial footing throughout her tenure, despite challenging economic times. She has contributed large sums of her own money and raised large sums from her friends. She donated \$18.4 million toward Ailey's \$54 million new home on West 55th Street at Ninth Avenue, called the Joan Weill Center for Dance, which opened in 2005 and is thought to be the largest dance complex in New York City.

She has turned Ailey's annual gala from a relatively modest affair into a sprawling celebration at Hilton New York's Grand Ballroom, where people dance until the wee hours. Last year it raised \$2.7 million while honoring Ms. Weill for her decade of service as board chairwoman.

In the three years after Ms. Weill became a co-chairwoman of the gala in 1996, the event tripled in size and revenue. This season's gala, on Nov. 30, features Michelle Obama and the model Iman as honorary chairwomen.

Ms. Weill has gone around the world with the dance company, helping to organize tours to Beijing, Shanghai and St. Petersburg, Russia. She has also made many visits to Ailey camps for disadvantaged preadolescents.

She and her husband were the lead supporters of Ailey's 2008 endowment campaign — which raised \$50 million as part of the 50th anniversary celebration — and received the Carnegie Medal of Philanthropy Award in 2009.

And she has become friends with the people who work at Ailey, entertaining the dancers in her home, making sure she knows everyone by name. "Joan has become over the years a real confidante," said Ms. Jamison, now chairwoman emerita.

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"A lot of people, including my husband, had no idea what this was about, so you have to take them," she said. "A lot of my friends, frankly, I literally dragged here, especially the guys. And now they all come back."

Ms. Weill was first exposed to Ailey as a teenager, when her family moved from California to New York City and lived at the Wellington Hotel near City Center on West 55th Street, where the company has long performed.

Years later, friends invited Ms. Weill and her husband — the longtime chairman of Carnegie Hall — to see Ailey in Harlem. Ms. Weill was smitten with the dancers and with Ms. Jamison: "She was such a role model and such a presence."

Before joining Ailey's board, Ms. Weill served on the board of Women in Need, a charity for homeless women and their families. "My husband used to kid me that he took care of culture and I took care of the streets," she said. "I realized that Ailey brought them together."

"Mr. Ailey always said the dance comes from the people, and therefore it should be brought back to the people."

Ms. Weill joined the board in 1994 and became chairwoman six years later. She and her husband have become Ailey's biggest financial supporters, though Ms. Weill declined to be specific about their total contributions.

"She has a lot," Mr. Battle said of Ms. Weill, "but she does a lot and she gives a lot."

Ailey is not Ms. Weill's only cause. She is co-chairwoman of the advisory committee of the Weill Music Institute at Carnegie Hall; chairwoman emerita of Paul Smith's College, The College

of the Adirondacks; and co-chairwoman of the New York Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center's Women's Health Symposium. But Ms. Weill said Ailey was her "No. 1" priority.

Her husband said so, too. "She doesn't fake it; this is real," he said. "She's there all the time."

While Ms. Weill devotes a good part of every week to Ailey matters, she said she also tries to stay out of the way. "I also don't want to micromanage," she said.

Ms. Luckman said Ms. Weill has carved out a role that is helpful without being intrusive.

"She's not a chairman that muddles with the day-to-day operations," Ms. Luckman said. "She's a great strategist."

Eventually, Ms. Weill said, she will step down. "I never want to

hold this organization back," she said. "They need to grow."

For now, Ms. Weill said she continues to enjoy being part of what she calls the Ailey family. "When you get to know the dancers and you see them on the

stage, it's just so much more meaningful," she said.

Born in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, Ms. Weill moved with her family to the San Fernando Valley because of her father's work as a press agent. "I'm an original

Valley Girl," she said.

The family returned to New York City when Ms. Weill was a teenager, and she graduated from Brooklyn College, where she majored in education and psychology. She and Mr. Weill met on April Fool's Day in 1954, when Ms. Weill was 19. They were married a year later.

After living in East Rockaway, N.Y., the Weills moved to Long Island before settling on the Upper

East Side, where they raised their two children. They now live on the Upper West Side.

Ms. Weill said her husband has been a tireless supporter of her commitment to Ailey. There was a time when he grew tired of "Revelations," the spirited piece that has become a crowd-pleasing staple of Ailey's repertoire. But he quickly saw the error of his ways. "I decided being tired of it is not a good thing," he joked. "So I'm not tired of it anymore."

Ms. Weill, on the other hand, said she continues to discover new things in "Revelations," year after year. "It's different every time," she said. "It's uplifting."