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A Woman Who Loves Dance Brings Ailey to Center Stage

By Pia Catton

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Weekend Profile

Joan Weill

Chairwoman of Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation

◆ Led fundraising efforts for the company's \$54 million building and \$61 million endowment

◆ Developed Ailey's annual gala into an fundraiser that routinely raises \$2 million

◆ Nurtured a board culture that emphasizes personal dedication



Natalie Keyssar for The Wall Street Journal

BY PIA CATTON

It was 1994, and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was onstage at the Apollo Theater. Backstage, word was spreading.

Joan Weill, the wife of Wall Street power player and arts philanthropist Sanford Weill, was in the audience.

"I heard from 10 people: 'Do you know Joan Weill was there?'" said Sharon Gersten Luckman, Alvin Ailey's head of fundraising at the time.

The enthusiasm was mutual. Captivated by the dancers, Ms. Weill met with artistic director Judith Jamison and soon joined the board of the struggling company, founded in 1958 by choreographer Alvin Ailey to further modern dance and preserve the African-American cultural experience.

"What intrigued me, besides the dance that I love and meet-

ing Ms. Jamison, was the potential for social service," said Ms. Weill, who hoped to expand the company's education and community outreach programs.

Arts philanthropy was new ground for Ms. Weill, but not for her husband. Mr. Weill had become board chairman of Carnegie Hall in 1991.

At Ailey, Ms. Weill quickly proved to be a leader in her own right: In 2000, she rose to board chairwoman. At the end of the year, she will step down from the post.

In her 20 years on the board, Ms. Weill built a formidable legacy: Ailey's endowment grew to \$61 million from less than \$1 million. In 2005, the company moved into a custom-built \$54 million building, which includes rehearsal studios and a theater. The classes offered there are for both amateur and professional dancers.

The Weills have given major gifts over the years, totaling about \$50 million, including Ms. Weill's donation of \$18.4 million for the building.

This season, Mr. Weill, the former chief executive and chairman of Citigroup, has signed on to give \$16 million as part of a pledge to match gifts of \$100,000 or more made toward a gala on Wednesday night in his wife's honor.

While many nonprofit organizations have deep-pocketed leaders, Ailey's leaders also had the ability to effectively manage the company's broad appeal, said Michael M. Kaiser, chairman of the DeVos Institute of Arts Management.

"Ailey is the model because of the breadth of the donor base," said Mr. Kaiser, the company's executive director from 1990 to 1993.

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HEARD & SCENE



Dancers rehearse 'Suspended Women' at the Joan Weill Center for Dance on West 55th Street. Although Ms. Weill is stepping down as Alvin Ailey Dance Theater's board chairwoman, she will 'always be connected.'

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Mr. Ailey, who died in 1989, was known for humanistic, often celebratory choreography that hooked both the ticket-buying public and the philanthropic community.

Ms. Weill saw the company work its magic on John Shaefer, an executive from Morgan Stanley who joined the board as a representative for his firm, a major corporate donor.

When he left Morgan Stanley in 2006, he wanted to continue his board work and is now a vice chairman.

"He got so in love with this, he said, 'Do you mind if I stay on?' That's a great tribute," said

Ms. Weill.

It is a mark of how far the company has come, said Stanley Present, a past board chairman.

"When we started out, it was not an establishment company," he said. "It was not a company that people said, 'Oh I'd love to serve on that board!'"

Turning that around took the concerted effort of Ms. Weill, Ms. Jamison and Ms. Luckman, who served as Ailey's executive director from 1995 to 2013.

"Most other arts organizations haven't had that single-minded focus," said Mr. Kaiser. "This was a very powerful triumvirate."

Ms. Weill, 80 years old and

born in the Bensonhurst area of Brooklyn, had previously focused her philanthropic efforts within social-service organizations, including Women in Need and Citymeals-on-Wheels, where she learned the basics of fundraising as the group's board president for three years.

"My husband used to say he covers culture, and I cover the streets," she said.

Ailey, though, was a bridge. One of her first projects was making over the company's annual gala, an important fundraising tool for many nonprofits.

At the time, Ailey held dinner in one room and dancing in another, which she said, "didn't

make a lot of sense."

Ms. Weill campaigned to move the event to the Hilton in Midtown, where dinner and dancing could be in one room, which made it more popular and helped it raise more money.

After her two years as co-chairwoman, the gala income doubled to \$1.5 million. When she became board chairwoman, it rose to \$2 million. In 2008, the company hit a record with \$2.9 million.

With more individual and corporate giving, Ailey was able to evolve beyond its support from the government—the State Department sponsored tours, especially in the 1970s—and founda-

tions.

"To create that transition is the biggest challenge," said Mr. Kaiser.

Other challenges were in facing skepticism when raising money for the building and endowment.

"You're going to raise what? For what? That sort of thing," she recalls hearing.

To offset that, Ms. Weill found donors willing to set an example. An early gift toward the building, and one that inspired trust from others, came from Simin and Herbert Allison, the late businessman who ran the government's bank bailout program.

The company's current milestone is the \$50 million Campaign for Ailey's Future.

Daria L. Wallach will become board chairwoman on Jan. 1, but Ms. Weill is still thinking about dancers at every level.

Her priorities now are scholarships and housing for students in the Ailey School, as well as formal job programs for retiring artists.

She may spend more time in Sonoma Valley, where she and her husband now have a home, but knows she will be thinking of the company's future.

"I'll always be connected," she said. "There are no boundaries to growth."