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A HUNDRED YEARS OF SERVICE

*From charity balls to charter schools: philanthropy is
the currency of Palm Beach life*

BY DANIEL A. HANLEY

CHARITY EVENTS in Palm Beach still bring out the Harry Winston diamonds and Oscar de la Renta gowns, but today the calendar also includes barefoot beach bashes and the shorter, breezier styles of Douglas Hannant and Lilly Pulitzer. But as Palm Beach observes its centennial this year, one thing has not changed a bit: the generosity and creative passion for philanthropic giving that has defined the town for a hundred years.

Even though he was known to dream big, industrialist Henry Morrison Flagler probably never imagined the kind of social scene he was seeding when he purchased an anonymous barrier island in 1893 and began building the Royal Poinciana Hotel. New Yorkers were the first to “find” this paradise and nurtured its growth with a mix of captains of industry, entertainment icons, political families, and headline-makers of all stripes. They set out

to establish a resort version of their own social whirl that today is packed with a calendar full of charity events.

In the 1920s, the wealthy, fashionable icons of Palm Beach distinguished themselves by mixing social events such as balls, luncheons, and garden parties with large doses of charitable giving, eventually earning the tiny island the distinction of becoming one of the country’s leading centers for philanthropy. Today, Palm Beach ranks among the top five zip codes nationally for philanthropic giving, a culture jump-started by one of society’s leading ladies and certainly one of its most stylish and adventurous, General Foods founder Marjorie Merriweather Post.

Some of the annual fund-raising events she launched and supported in the 1920s have sustained those nonprofits through the decades and thrive today. She began hosting teas to benefit





This page: the Palm Beach bike path. Inset: Daniel A. Hanley, Esq. Opposite: "Whitehall," the residence of Henry Morrison Flagler.

the local Animal Rescue League around 1930 at her dramatic, oceanfront residence called Mar-A-Lago (now a private club owned by Donald Trump), and the tradition continued until her death, in 1973. Today, that organization, now called the Peggy Adams Animal Rescue League, is still supported by some of the generous ladies who attended those teas.

During the post-World War II period, the annual balls in Palm Beach became larger and generated more funds than ever for social services, education, healthcare, the environment, and the arts. The well-oiled New York-Palm Beach giving corridor also became more firmly established as the island's population grew, with many New York families choosing to relocate permanently or spend more time here. The Palm Beach Heart Ball, benefiting the American Heart Association, was established during this period, and it is now one of the top fund-raising events for the American Heart Association, nationwide.

The 1980s and '90s saw a "new guard" fall in step with the old guard, and it began to quietly reshape the landscape of charity events. While financial heavy-hitters such as Henry Kravis, Nelson Peltz, and Wilbur Ross made regular headlines in the Palm Beach and New York papers, a new type of philanthropy was also starting to emerge, one marked by a more tactical and collaborative approach.

Longtime Palm Beach resident and great-grandson of Henry Flagler, William M. Matthews, discovered an innovative model of giving when his attorney introduced him to the Community Foundation for Palm Beach and Martin Counties. With more than seven hundred community foundations at work today in the U.S., these organizations give philanthropists the pooled resources and professional expertise they need.

"The Community Foundation is very adept at spotting trends and identifying broad-based, emerging needs ahead of the gen-

eral public," says Matthews, who later served as the foundation's chairman. "It's one thing to write a check, but you also want to identify where you may be able to have the most impact."

Emilia Fanjul is a good example of today's hands-on philanthropist. As the wife of Cuban-born sugar magnate Jose "Pepe" Fanjul, she has attended her fair share of charity balls, but she also makes regular trips to the rural town of Pahokee, Florida, where she oversees renovations on the building that will become the new Everglades Preparatory Academy, a charter school she helped found in 2001.

Fanjul inherited her philanthropic genes from her mother, the late Helena Johnson Hackley, who volunteered full-time at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, helping Spanish-speaking patients fill out forms and learn English. Emilia, in turn, passed those genes on to her own daughter, Emilia Fanjul Pfeiffer, who is involved in several New York charities.

Besides being more hands-on, the under-40 generation of givers tends to be a little more informal in their style. Members of "The Islanders," a group of young adults affiliated with the Town of Palm Beach United Way, prefer afternoon beach party fund-raisers to traditional charity balls, and would rather run a 10K race to support their favorite cause than host an elegant lunch. They're also more likely to use Twitter, Facebook, and text messaging to promote events. This social-media savvy, informed, connected, and hands-on group of young givers are having children and starting to raise their own families, so Palm Beach giving is likely to stay connected through the generations to come—at least for another hundred years. ♦



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