

The joy of giving till it hurts

Lauren Foster talks to Abigail Disney about her famous name in the third in a series on women and philanthropy



Making bonds: Abigail Disney finds the greatest reward from her philanthropic work in human connections

Abigail Disney distrusts epiphanies. But then remembers she recently had one.

"I went with my family for the weekend to Miami and we were sitting around the pool and I just looked around and thought: 'If you could just get a bottom line figure for what was spent on plastic surgery just here at the swimming pool.' The boobs and the eyes. Aargh, it's so sad," says the philanthropist and Disney heiress.

"Everybody is spending all this money in search of something that I guarantee you they would find easier if they just took it, and instead of a boob job, went and got involved with [philanthropy]. They wouldn't [care] about what their sagging boobs looked like any more if they found a better way of being connected into the world."

Disney, founder and president of the Daphne Foundation and vice-chairwoman of Shamrock Holdings, which manages the Disney family's investments, found her connection in early 1989. That was when she met Gretchen Buchenholz, a child advocate and founder of the Association to Benefit Children, a non-profit organisation that provides educational models for needy children and their families.

At the time, Disney was a graduate student at Columbia University and struggling with her doctoral dissertation. She was also tired of what she calls her "metro section" phase. "I had been randomly throwing cheques at things. I would read the B sections of the New York Times and something would break my heart and I would anonymously send money," she says.

Buchenholz, who was preparing to open Variety House, a treatment centre and nursery for crack-affected babies and those with HIV/Aids, wasted no time putting the new volunteer to work folding laundry and, later, carrying babies.

"When I started the laundry-doing and baby-carrying, it's very interesting that I was spending 12-hour days in the library getting nothing done and suddenly I was spending eight-hour days [with Gretchen] and three-hour days in the library and I was getting five times as much done," Disney says. "And there was no accident there. I was starving for humanity and I had forgotten that it was like vitamin C. I had just forgotten to give myself what I needed. But that's on a small and individual scale an example of what philanthropy did for me on a much larger scale."

Disney is sitting cross-legged and barefoot on a couch in Buchenholz's office at Cassidy's Place, ABC's preschool for poor children, many of whom have special needs. Warm and honest, the 47-year-old is passionate about her work and blunt about the contradictions of her life. While privilege is often isolating, she says, philanthropy can reconnect us to the world.

"I was sort of lost in the wilderness. I found Gretchen, I did some laundry, suddenly work on my dissertation kicked right in because I think I was just hungry for humans and relevance in a sense that anything I was doing was maturing," she says. "Through Gretchen I connected to

foundation work and one door led to another door to another door, which got me to The New York Women's Foundation and that was the rest of the education."

Disney is honorary chairwoman of the board of NYWF and has been involved for about 15 years. She is also a board member of the White House Project, a non-profit organisation dedicated to encouraging women to succeed in political life.

"Women in philanthropy are important for the same reason that having women in politics is important – because we need to get all of the voices to all of the tables because all of the dialogues are enriched and more valid as a result," Disney says.

At NYWF's recent fundraising breakfast, Disney asked the 2,500 people in the audience – mostly women – to rethink their giving. Then she put herself on the line.

"I am challenging you to make two gifts," she said. "Why? Because I don't believe in either/or. What I believe in, and what will kick-start change, is both/and. If you make the two gifts and they fulfil the requirements I am about to list, I will match both of your gifts, dollar for dollar, in the form of a grant to The New York Women's Foundation of up to \$1m."

She didn't stop there. "I

want you to give until it hurts," she said.

But has she? "I feel very vulnerable to the accusation that I don't give till it hurts because I live very well, and travel with my kids and have a nice house and the rest of it, so before I made that challenge, I felt I had to spend some time really

'It takes a strong personality to take the reins when Daddy made the people who are riding with you'

thinking about that and really talking to my husband about it and so when I made the \$1m challenge it definitely was one that hurt. There are a lot of things we are going to have to give up in order to get that done. I just didn't feel right talking to those people in that room unless I was putting my money where my mouth was."

But, she adds: "The problem is: in my position in life, I'll never feel like I give enough."

That "position", of course, is thanks to her famous surname. (Her father, Roy, is

a nephew of the late Walt Disney.)

Disney is open about her life. "My name sort of sets me apart and it causes people to offer me more credit for things when I'm right, and less credit for things when I'm wrong. And it tends to take neutrality out of everybody's reactions and that works in my favour and against me," she says. "And then, of course, there is the fact that no matter how I might rough it I can always go to the fancy hotel if I want and knowing that is always in your back pocket is existentially very different than what it is to other people."

So when she set up her family foundation, she named it the Daphne Foundation, an anagram of her, and her husband, Pierre Hauser's, initials.

"My name is complicated. If I throw my name on to a foundation then it becomes about something entirely else," Disney says.

But she concedes there are times when trotting out the Disney name is necessary. "When I have used my name it's been because I've thought that if Abby Disney jumps in, the water is fine and other people will jump in too, and it has worked that way a lot. Some people just need the first one to jump in," she says. "If you feel your money is going to push other money into the ring, then you had better use your name."

It took time for Disney to become comfortable with large gifts.

"I held back on that kind of gift for a lot of years because I simply had a very mundane problem that a lot of women in my position have, which is I was afraid of it. It felt like I was going to make it all go away, it really felt like one of those little spores that you touch and it turns to powder. I really had a genuine fear that I was going to be a bag lady," Disney says. "And once I started really getting in there and managing it

myself and taking some ownership of it, I saw that it's not dust at all, you can move it around, it changes, and grows and does all the stuff it's supposed to do. It's not that hard. And, having figured that out, I feel like I'm driving the train now."

It is the fear of exposure, she says, that often keeps wealthy women from being upfront about their philanthropy. "There are ways to be upfront about your giving: it's not necessarily about the hospital wing being named after you but it's incredibly important as a tool for drawing other money in," she says.

It takes courage, she adds, to be bold about giving, especially when wealth is inherited. "It takes a pretty strong personality to take the reins when Daddy made the reins and Daddy chose the people who are riding with you and it's all in Daddy's office. That's hard to do."

In between juggling her philanthropic work, four children, and business life, Disney is producing a documentary film about the critical role of women in bringing about peace in Liberia.

"I could trace for you the direct line from folding laundry in Gretchen's living room to finding myself in Monrovia talking to these remarkable women who challenged Charles Taylor to stop the civil war there, and it was just by connecting the dots," she says.

The greatest reward of her work, Disney says, is the human connection. "I am richer than I could ever imagine being in friendships and relationships and what could be better than that? I would take that over a Rolex watch any day of the week. I don't go around in a Chanel suit, and I bite my fingernails, and I'm not fabulous, and I'm not thin and all the rest of it, but I will tell you, I am a happy girl."

Tuesday: Part Four – a conversation with Susan Berresford, president of the Ford Foundation

What's in a name? Stepping out of the shadows

Many female philanthropists are stepping out of the shadows and allowing their names to adorn institutions they have financed – and not just in conjunction with their husbands' names, such as the Carmen and John Thain labour and delivery unit at the Children's Hospital of New York-Presbyterian, or The Joan and Sanford I. Weill medical college and graduate school of medical sciences of Cornell University.

The University of South Carolina's Moore School of Business, for example, is named after Darla Moore, a former banker who gave her alma mater \$25m in 1998.

Martha Taylor is co-founder of the Women's Philanthropy Institute, part of the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University and vice-president of the University of Wisconsin Foundation. She says that while many women no longer make

their planned gifts anonymously, they are still reluctant to put their names on buildings.

When people see men's names on plaques, they "think men are really generous and women aren't, so it's a self-fulfilling prophecy," she says. "Women naming buildings on their gifts demonstrates that women are leaders... [and] know the importance of good role models."

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