

SCENES *from an interview*

Philanthropist Gerri Aaron

by Gus Mollasis



She was born in Philadelphia, a city kid, who yearned for a day of fresh air in the country to take in nature and just play outside. Today, many years later, she takes in the beauty that surrounds her with the eyes and wonderment of a child, while continuing a full life of living and giving to the arts and to her community. She is a giver with a capital G, and it's easier to name the causes she's not involved with than the ones she is. Because she's opened her very big heart to Sarasota, we can all breathe a little easier. Recently I sat down with Gerri Aaron and we took a look at some of the scenes from an interview of her life.

Where were you born?

I was born in Philadelphia, and I still maintain a residence there. A lot of my family is still up there.

What was your childhood like?

I had an interesting childhood. I had marvelous parents. My father and I were extremely close. He was a very unusual man – a brilliant lawyer and a musician who was a charming intellectual and a very funny man. My mother was a good mother. She was a good person, but my relationship with my father was closer. I had a sister who was three years younger, but we were not very close growing up. We became closer as we both got married and became interested in our families.

Describe your perfect day as a child?

I went to summer camp in the mountains, in the Poconos at Camp Lindenmare. I loved getting away from home and being at summer camp. I really expressed myself generously and explicitly in sports and in friendship and developed into somewhat of a leader at summer camp. I attended camp between the ages of

12 and 18. It was the best time of my life.

How did you find Sarasota?

I came down here with my husband in the early 1970s while he was on business. And I remember telling him when we retire, this is it. This is where I want to be. So I always knew that I loved Sarasota. I consider myself a Sarasotan. Sarasota is my home.

What was it about Sarasota that so attracted you?

I loved the area. The big buildings weren't here. There was no such thing as condos. Longboat Key was very lonely and remote. In terms of the distance, it just seemed far from Sarasota. I loved little Sarasota, which was a tiny low key place. I loved the feeling down here, the complexion and the beauty of it. I wasn't interested in anything but having fun then. I played tennis, and went to the Asolo Repertory Theatre every night.

Define a Giver?

A giver is somebody who has the feeling of doing something that benefits others – philanthropy. When people ask me what I do, I say

besides being retired, I'm a philanthropist. And that's what I love doing. I feel it's very important to give back to the community.

Were you always such a giver?

I was always very interested in what was going on in the world and in my community, and I was always involved in something. I had a big family after I was married, and not a lot of money. So I didn't give a lot of money. I was involved with the elementary school. I read to the kids, took them to the library. I was active in my politics and in my community. I am a liberal. I was active in liberal activities.

What do the arts mean to you?

They are terribly important to our culture. I think it's very important for children to understand art. It's all around us and that's how it becomes part of the community and the environment. You have to see what is outside. Children don't go outside as much as they used to, so they don't see the trees, they don't see the animals, the bugs. Not that I'm a scientist, I'm certainly not. But I always loved seeing what is around me. Reading was very important. My father read to me when I was very young and inspired my love of reading. Books were very important. Art became very important and I dabbled in art myself. I painted. I danced.

What does winning the Nancy Roucher Annual Arts Education Award mean to you?

I was on the Sarasota County Arts Council for many years. A big interest of mine was keeping arts in education. We had a struggle with it when I was first on the board, because there was a lack of money as there still is today. I helped them get the arts back in the schools. That was my interest – arts and education. And Nancy Roucher and I were friends, she was on the board. They have a principal's luncheon, where the principals talk about what they are doing in their schools to interest their kids in the arts and I love it.

Sum up the importance of Planned Parenthood, another organization you support, to the community and to society in general?

Planned Parenthood brings health care and health education to all people, in particular to young people so that they can plan their lives and their family considerations. It's a healthcare agency and the people that go there have to pay some money, but it's not as expensive as some private physicians would be. People get a lot of understanding on how they can take care of themselves and how they can plan their lives.

Your husband was the one of the founders of Comcast. Define that accomplishment in your eyes?

He was one of the founders and at the time it was just a job. He

was creating and had a vision that they were creating a new industry, which of course is what they did. He was a businessman, not an engineer. It was a fabulous beginning and a little scary, because it was so new. Nobody knew what he did. All my neighbors said to me, "What does your husband do? What is cable TV?" And they came here (Sarasota) early on to bring cable TV. They put up a big antenna where Comcast is today, which was a pig farm. I believe that Sarasota was one of the first communities that insisted that the cable be put underground.

How did you meet and how did you know he was the one?

We met in college at Temple University. We were in a class together and met through a friend. We had an economics course together that I got through by reading his notes. I felt sorry for him because he was an orphan and he lived in a ratty home that he rented near the University in a very difficult part of the city. I invited him to come to dinner at my house, and I made a terrible dinner, burned the chicken, ruined the string beans, I did everything wrong but he liked having a home cooked meal. (Laughing) We just liked each other so it was easy. We were married for 50 years and he died seven years ago.

Do you watch a lot of TV?

I watch a moderate amount of TV in the evening when I'm home. I'm not home that much. My husband didn't watch that much.

Do we watch too much TV and have too much technology in our daily lives?

I feel that young people should get outside, instead of text-messaging, being on the computer, or watching TV all the time. It upsets me to see my grandchildren so devoted to text-messaging little messages such as, "Where are you?", and "What are you doing?" I tell them why can't you just visit and go out for a walk and talk to your friends. They don't do that. For my kids I used to open the door and they would just go outside and play all the time. And it was cold up north, but they were outside.

Tell me about the Tree Foundation?

Professor Meg Lowman of New College got me interested in this and is one of my mentors. She started the Tree Foundation about ten years ago and asked me join the board. She was encouraging her New College students to go to middle schools and take the kids to Myakka State Park for tours. The Tree Foundation built a canapé, a little house in the trees, very charming, and thousands of kids go there and walk up through this little canapé. I've done it dozens of times with her as she tries to interest people in the Tree Foundation. And I've gone up with my own grandchildren, and it's just wonderful. Being with Professor Lowman is an

education. She is so smart and knows so much about field biology. I've gone with her to the Amazon, Machu Picchu, Ecuador, Belize, just following her footsteps. She encourages others to be interested in ecology. The Tree Foundation is bringing in more people and interest and we are currently seeking money to build something into the trees. Ideally children will be able to climb up into the canapé, where they can look all around them and take in nature. We're hoping the tree could house one to two dozen children at a time. The whole point is getting them out and into the country. Meg Lowman has a mantra, "No child left indoors."

Did you climb trees as child?

I knew how, but I lived in the city, we roller skated and played ball. I was a tomboy.


It's important to give because...

You have to love helping other people, by either giving or volunteering your time to help the community where you live and beyond where you live.

What are the keys to living a fulfilling life?

I feel am fulfilled because I am close to my family. I love the community I live in up north and down here. I love being able to do what I can do to help all the organizations that I am involved with in this wonderful community.

How do you want to be remembered?

I plan on living a long time so if I will be remembered, it will be by my family and any friends I have left. I'd like to be remembered for the many things that I've done. Not so much for the money, but for the help that I have given. 

Keeping A PHILANTHROPIC Spirit On A Budget!



In spite of current economic conditions, when many of us are facing personal financial challenges, nonprofit organizations continue to have financial and volunteer needs that must be fulfilled. Unfortunately, it comes as no surprise that many of these charitable organizations that do so much good for our community are facing hard-times of their own due to dwindling support from individual contributors, corporate cut-backs and declining grants.

According to Jim Shirley, executive director for the Sarasota Arts Council, "Arts and cultural organizations throughout the nation are being affected by cut-backs in funding more than any other time in our history and Sarasota's no different. The nonprofit arts and cultural organizations in Sarasota combine to be the fifth largest employer in the county, which is why it is critical that we all pull together." Jim says, "It not only affects the quality of our lives, it also has a significant impact on our economy."

The good news is that the Woman's Exchange can help keep that philanthropic spirit alive by enabling individuals like you to turn your unwanted items into a cash donation made out to one or more of the many charitable organizations in Sarasota County. Best of all, you won't have to reach into your pocket to do it. All that's required is that you consign under the number of the charity of your choice. When your items sell, 65 percent of the proceeds will be mailed to that particular charity in the form of a check, and the remaining amount will go to support the Woman's Exchange and the arts of Sarasota.

"I believe in this program," says Karen Koblenz executive director and CEO of the Woman's Exchange. "It's an excellent opportunity for people from all walks of life to give back to their community, making it a better place for all of us to live. It's just another form of recycling but with a cash reward for the charity of your choice."

The Woman's Exchange is a nonprofit organization with a central purpose - to support and enrich a variety of programs for local cultural organizations affiliated with the arts. Funds for this purpose are realized through a consignment operation in which merchandise is accepted either as a donation or for consignment from both individuals and organizations

to be sold in their downtown store, located at 539 S. Orange Ave.

Since its inception in 1962 the Woman's Exchange has grown from a small one room facility to a major community based operation occupying a 12,000 square foot building filled to the brim with hidden yet affordable treasures like Baccarat crystal, Tiffany silver, 14 kt. gold jewelry incusted with diamonds, Gucci, Prada, Chico's, high-end furniture and beautiful handmade rugs in addition to everyday household items.

Over the years, the Woman's Exchange has given more than \$7 million in grants and scholarships to support the arts in Sarasota County. The thousands of individuals who volunteer, donate, consign and shop the Woman's Exchange made this possible.

Past grants and scholarships have been awarded to area high school and college students, the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, The Players, Asolo Theatre, Art Center Sarasota, Banyan Theater Company, Florida Studio Theatre, Jazz Juvenocracy, Key Chorale, La Musica, Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, Sarasota Orchestra, Sarasota Pops Orchestra, Sarasota Opera, Sarasota Senior Theater and the Hermitage Artist Retreat to name a few.

If you or someone you know are interested in applying for a grant or scholarship, please visit www.womansexchange.com and fill out an application online. The deadline is 4 p.m. Jan. 31, 2010.

Stop by and experience the Woman's Exchange for yourself and you'll quickly fall in love with all that it offers and represents.

P.S. They also need more volunteers to help them spread the wealth.

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