

When Life Was Dutiful

By Mary McNamara

It's easy to pick out the few women younger than 50 in the crowd that mills and murmurs over the golden carpet of Beverly Hills's posh Wilshire Beverly Regent. Sprinkled like poppy seeds throughout the ballroom, they're the ones wearing black. At the Colleagues' Valentine luncheon, there's a lot of red, pink, navy, green — a veritable rainbow of designer color, in fact, but not a lot of black. It is a luncheon, after all, and these women, 700 or so of them, are mostly of a generation that still believes one does not wear black at a non-funereal event unless, of course, it's after 6.

They are women who wear big diamond brooches, carry handbags with short straps, write thank-you notes on monogrammed stationery, and attend afternoon lectures and charity fashion shows. Like this one.

Even Nancy Reagan has turned out for this annual fashion-show fete, which will raise more than \$230,000 for Children's Institute International for abused children and their families.

These women are not only of a generation, they are of a certain socioeconomic status. The ladies who luncheon. Many of them were debutantes. Many of them are Blue Book. Many of them contribute much time and money to various cultural/philanthropic institutions. Many of them run — or have run — some of Southern California's most venerable institutions: the Junior League, the Costume Council, the Women's Guild, the Library Foundation, St. John's Foundation, the Music Center's Blue Ribbon.

As a group, they represent the old-fashioned, old-moned, mostly WASP social elite, the kind one had to be born into, or marry. As a group, they also represent the civic-minded grandes dames personified by the late Dorothy ("Buffy") Chandler, wife of former Los Angeles Times Publisher Norman Chandler. The woman who, conventional wisdom has it, built the Los Angeles Music Center — and most of downtown. Politics aside, social status inequities aside, these women are responsible for raising and giving away millions of dollars to local charities and nonprofit organizations every year.

And they may well be the last of their breed.

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From the League of Women Voters to the Los Angeles County Museum's Costume Council, traditional women's organizations are way past going gray. The median age, which once at least started with a 4, is pushing 60. Longtime members turning to pass the baton to the next generation are meeting empty air. The baby boomers, omnipresent in so many other places, are nowhere to be found.

"It's a great big change," says longtime philanthropist Caroline Ahmanson. "The people who are working now are the people who have been doing it for years. The younger generation is simply not coming forth."

For years, the local philanthropic community wondered who would be the next Mrs. Chandler. Now the growing concern is how to preserve the organizations and the tradition from which such a person could emerge.

"This is something we are constantly talking about," says Jane Ackerman, president of the Council of Library Foundation and past president of the Costume Council. "We're always looking for younger women. But there doesn't seem to be the interest that my generation had. Or the pressure."

"My mother-in-law had me join the Adoption Guild when I was first married," she adds. "They had to call and see if I was 21 because there was a cocktail party for new members. My daughters-in-law don't understand what I do, and frankly, they don't seem interested."

"Who is the next generation? I don't know," says Juli Miller, president of the Costume Council. At 39, Miller says she is always the youngest woman in the room. "The women who have been working for years are saying, 'I'm too tired,' the women my age either have young children or their own jobs and they're too busy. I don't know what we're going to do."

Life's Busy Pace

At the Junior League, considered the unofficial training grounds for the philanthropic portion of the privileged life, the numbers are slightly down from an increase eight years ago, but more significantly, active members seem less able to commit themselves to as many hours.

"It is so, so different than it used to be," says Cathy Woolway, president-elect of Junior League Pasadena. "There is so much more competition for volunteers. We are barely maintaining. And it's a completely different

atmosphere. Everyone is so businesslike. The old pearls image has never been more inaccurate. You can't even call a cocktail party because everyone is too busy."

Just as the reasons for joining a charitable organization are myriad — the desire to give back, to form friendships, to further status — so are the reasons for not joining. The landscape of philanthropy all the country has changed drastically in the last 10 years. Two terms come up in any conversation about these changes: transference of wealth and entrepreneurial philanthropy.

The former is the inheritance of family wealth by the baby boomers, who, not surprisingly, have definitions of charity that differ from those of their parents — they are not, for example, as devoted to the arts. The latter refers to the trend among the mavens of made-money of controlling their charitable dollars just as they do their businesses, often by forming their own charities rather than contributing to existing organizations.

Priorities Change

The professional wife, the keystone of many long-established boards and councils, is a vanishing species. Women, even truly rich women, having reaped the benefits of feminism, are pursuing their own careers; marrying and having children later, if at all, and generally avoiding the behind-the-scenes paths their mothers trod.

"I was one of the youngest people in the room," says Marcia Hobbs, chairwoman of Christie's Los Angeles and a longtime board member of a wide range of organizations, including the Blue Ribbon and Children's Hospital. "But it was a family tradition. My friend growing up was Laurie Salvatore, and I would visit, and there would be all the Blue Ribbon stuff all over her mother Grace's bed, and it just gets into you."

But tradition has never been a driving force for the generation now hitting midlife.

"We're going to be doing this in our walkers," says Dede McNichols, who attended the Colleagues luncheon. "I have four daughters, and I'm frantically trying to interest them. But their interest is in career and family. The young women have delayed having children, and then once they have them, they

can't ever seem to find baby-sitters. We took our kids with us when we stuffed envelopes."

The Colleagues, former president Ann Johnson points out, do have a built-in recruitment tool: the CHIPS (Colleague Helpers in Philanthropic Services). Pam Conkal, president of the group, says they have no trouble recruiting members, whose ages range from 30 to 45, because they are so small, only 40 members. The trouble comes, she says, when these women try to take on more than one activity,

In previous generations, there was a large degree of cross-pollination among groups — women who sat on the board of one group inevitably participated in three or four others. That, says Conkal, is becoming increasingly difficult.

"People like me who have a full-time job and kids, we have so much to juggle already," she says. "I belong to Junior League, and I had to go sustainer. I just couldn't make the commitments that they need of an active member. Women my age have to pick and choose their groups."

Raised in the high-tech, high pressure aftermath of the '60s, many women of the boom dismiss the world of place cards and dinner dances as anachronistic.

"The fashion show luncheon, the cocktail party no longer work," says Abby Levy, president of the Women's Guild of Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. "Women are no longer interested in showing up at a meeting or an event and looking beautiful and going home. They want to be involved, but in a hands-on way."

Levy, who is optimistic about the future of organizations like the Guild, admits that, yes, there is a gap that will cause some trouble in the next 10 years. The organizations, she says, must make themselves more attractive and realistic.

"The old ways," she says, "are no longer viable."

It's an amazing transformation, says Jack Shakely, president of California Community Foundation. "Where women once used these boards and organizations to learn business skills, now they're coming to them fully prepared. They're rejecting certain kinds of traditional fundraising — the Hollywood premiere, the big lavish ball — because it's just not cost-effective," he says.

A Nationwide Dearth

Los Angeles is not the only city puzzling over the case of the missing women. Stacey Palmer, editor of the Chronicle of Philanthropy, says the search party extends from sea to shining sea.

“We look at the numbers, and women are still doing most of the fundraising work, but when we talk to people recruiting, they say it is impossible, just impossible.”

Many traditional charities and nonprofits still operate with a 1950s mind-set, she says, which they had better rethink — and fast.

“Women have more of their own money now, and they’re not as interested in chairing the benefits,” she says. “And the beneficiaries are changing — younger people may be more interested in ‘Welfare to Work’ programs. The symphony is probably not going to be their first choice. The women especially want to get away from the stereotype of working for the arts.”

For many museums and libraries and music centers, already experimenting with ventures like expanded gift shops, chain restaurants and catalog sales in an attempt to raise some of the ready, this is not good short-term news. And beyond that, the buildings that house them are, as Mrs. Chandler knew, very powerful juju-visual reminders of the role, and responsibility, the rich have in the cities that spawn them.

The Familiar Generation Gap

Not everyone would bemoan the loss of the Blue Ribbon or the Colleagues. They are exclusive organizations, and exclusive organizations are, of course, based on exclusion. But many, on both sides of the donations, seem concerned about the general shift away from the traditional do-good groups.

“If you look at the older organizations, even the family foundations, there is a difference than [those] in which the manager is also the grant-maker,” says Beryl Gerber, director of the University of Judaism’s MBA Program in Nonprofit Management. “There are professional advisors, whose knowledge of the world outside is broader than the passions of the one who has made the money.”

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This specialization of philanthropy is what many women fear. “There’s not enough thinking of the whole community,” Ahmanson says. “The new money, especially the entertainment money, has not been trained. The new money comes in so fast and in such big amounts, there isn’t the sense of it coming from this city.”

“Everyone has a right to choose the cause they’re interested in,” she adds, “but it’s important to think of the city as a whole.”

In the end, it comes down to the archetypal conflict between the generations. When the older women speak, it is often with a motherly exasperation.

“There are a lot of wonderful organizations doing such good work,” Ahmanson says. “People need to be educated, the young people. They seem to think more about making money and spending it. Well, you only wear one outfit at a time, you know.”

“People want to be hands-on, I’ll give them work to do,” Hobbs says. “If someone comes to me at a place of change in their lives, I tell them, nothing will make you feel better than doing something for someone else.”

Ackerman observes that many of the young women who don’t have time for philanthropy “do have time for book clubs and investment groups.”

“But,” she adds kindly, “there are so many other choices for them. I had my children when I was quite young, and this is just what you did. I don’t know if I would now, given all the other options. I think I would, but it would be much more difficult, wouldn’t it?”

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