

Personal Passions

By SUZANNE MCGEE

DONALD AND BARBARA JONAS TURNED PLENTY of heads in the New York art world last year when they sold 15 works from their cutting-edge collection of contemporary art to raise funds for philanthropic giving. The pieces, including some by the likes of de Kooning and Rothko, fetched \$44.2 million at Christie's.

What the couple has been doing with that money is equally striking. Rather than backing big, popular causes like hunger relief or improved education, the Jonases, like a growing number of philanthropists, have homed in on a narrow field where they can not only have an impact but also find personal meaning. The Jonases, both in their 70s, decided to funnel their millions to the nursing profession. "When we are younger, we don't think about nursing that much," says Barbara Jonas, a former psychiatric social worker. "As we get older, we realize that the quality of care we get is going to depend a lot on nurses."

The Jonases—Donald was the founder of the Lechter's chain of home-goods stores—grew alarmed by projections that the U.S. faces a shortfall of one million nurses within two decades. So earlier this year they launched a foundation called the Jonas Center for Nursing Excellence. It already has awarded \$3 million in grants to 11 collaborative projects between nursing schools and hospitals. This month they hosted a conference in New York that brought together some 350 nurses, educators and policymakers under the heading "Who Will Care for Me?"

[graphic]

In philanthropy, the "me" factor is looming ever larger. Across the country, many active donors are favoring well-defined causes that stir them emotionally. Some are supporting fields they dreamed of pursuing professionally earlier in life, while others are hoping to eradicate diseases that claimed the lives of loved ones. Some are pushing ideas—at times controversial ones—they hold dear; others are simply celebrating their notion of beauty.

Philanthropy experts generally applaud this kind of giving. "That personal connection is what creates in a donor the willingness to become committed and involved for the long haul," says Melissa Berman, chief executive of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, in New York.

In fact, advisers are actively pushing wealthy donors toward causes with personal meaning. "We go through a series of conversations with our clients about what excites them, what freaks them out and what, if they had all the money in the world and could use it to solve any issue, would they choose to address," says Melanie Schnoll-Begun, managing director of Citigroup Philanthropic Services.

For some donors, identifying the right cause isn't straightforward. Schnoll-Begun recalls one client whose grandchild's autism hadn't been properly diagnosed by doctors until the age of 11, making early intervention impossible. One logical option might have been to underwrite autism-related medical research or related social programs. Ultimately, however, the grandparents realized their grandson had found a home for himself in choirs, where autism didn't limit his ability to participate. "So they ended up endowing choral programs in churches and schools in the Bronx, where there is a shortage of musical-education programs," says Schnoll-Begun.

So far, the couple has donated more than \$500,000 to endow choral programs at five churches and even more on supplementing music-education programs, all with a focus on including learning-disabled children.

Some donors feel that their philanthropy is the outcome of a lifetime of experience. Dana Dakin, who has run her own investment-marketing consulting firm for some three decades, says it was the approach of her 60th birthday that prompted her to begin "giving back" to society. "I knew that I wanted to help foster great communities like the one I was living in," she says, referring to Wilmot, N.H.

Dakin zeroed in on Ghana, thanks in part to the honors thesis she had written decades earlier at Scripps College on the subject of pan-Africanism. "I decided I would 'adopt' a village and set up a microfinance program," extending business loans to the local women, she says. After tapping the network of contacts she had developed over her career, she set off for Ghana in early 2003.

One of her moves after arriving was to call up the father of her physical trainer in the United States, who lived nearby. "The next morning, he showed up at my hotel with an elderly gentleman, barefoot, in a caftan, wearing a turban and carrying a staff, who turned out to be the fetish priest from a village," she recalls. "They had found a village for me—Pokuase—and found a place for me to stay there while I talked to the women." A few weeks later, she returned to the U.S. in search of capital for her fledgling organization, Womens Trust. "I sold one of my cars and got \$18,000, and raised a bit more from friends and neighbors," she says.

[Jonases]

Donald and Barbara Jonas, right, who fund nursing initiatives, mingling with nursing students and educators at a seminar.

As often happens with personally engaged philanthropists, Dakin's enthusiasm rubbed off on others. Leslie Lake, a New York hedge-fund manager, reluctantly agreed to meet with Dakin more than two years ago. "Until then, I was the anti-philanthropist; I'd say yeah, yeah, just tell me how much to put on the check, now buzz off and let me get back to work," she says, laughing. "Then I heard her talking and I said, wait a minute, this woman sold her car to do this? She just got on a plane and went to Ghana?" Equally intriguing was that Womens Trust wasn't about handouts, instead emphasizing women and their households becoming financially self-sufficient. Last summer, Lake, by now a major donor, was astonished to find herself boarding a plane for Ghana, en route to see Pokuase for herself.

SOME PERSONAL PHILANTHROPY stems from personal tragedy. That's certainly been true with Steve Case. About 25% of the grants made by the America Online founder's \$19 million foundation go to his ABC2, a brain-cancer research project. But brain tumors—indeed, cancer research as a whole—didn't even register on Case's philanthropic radar screen until March 2001, when his brother, Hambrecht & Quist investment banker Dan Case, was diagnosed with the disease. "All I knew was that brain tumors were kind of risky business." After Dan's diagnosis, the two brothers began asking questions of doctors and researchers, only to discover little was known about the causes or effective treatments. In contrast to AIDS, little progress had been made in making brain cancer a disease with a long-term survival rate.

To both entrepreneurially minded brothers, those answers were unacceptable. Given six to 12 months to live, Dan Case turned to his brother and insisted that they start an organization that would seek out more information, "so that other families got better answers and better experiences," Steve Case recalls.

Dan Case died 15 months after his diagnosis, but Steve Case continues the battle. "There are five times more clinical trials than there used to be" involving brain-cancer treatments, he says. The way that Case wages his campaign is shaped by his business style—making strong use of entrepreneurial organizations and interorganizational collaborations. Combining funding for both biotechnology businesses and

nonprofit organizations "strikes me as the best way to come up with innovative ideas and increase the odds of having a significant impact," says Case. "Some parts of the [puzzle] can be best done through philanthropy, others through business."

DONORS DRIVEN BY PERSONAL PASSIONS TEND not to shy away from new models or controversial causes, notes Gene Tempel, executive director of Indiana University's Center on Philanthropy. "Often, big breakthroughs come out of a committed philanthropist's willingness to embrace a potentially controversial idea or mission," he says.

Renowned investor John Templeton, who is 93, once dreamed of becoming a missionary but went on instead to create a thriving investment business. Then, in his 70s, he set up a foundation, now one of the country's largest, to investigate connections between science and religion. The foundation has funded such programs as exploring the role that spirituality plays in health care. Its annual \$1.5 million prize for research linking science and religion is one of the richest such awards available, and recipients have ranged from Mother Teresa to cosmologists, scientists and philosophers.

Foundation officials say that the current debate over "intelligent design" has led them to overhaul their Website, emphasizing the scientific rigor they demand from grantees. The clear message is that people looking for facts to support predetermined positions should go elsewhere.

Susan Buffett, Warren Buffett's late wife, provided extensive financial support for family-planning initiatives and abortion rights. In a 1988 interview with the Omaha World Herald, Susie Buffett, who died in July 2004, recalled an experience that helped shape her views—walking into an Omaha home as a volunteer to collect a child for a Head Start class. "There were four or five other little children lined up on a cot and the mother had a baby," she said. "None of them could go out because they didn't have shoes. This is so hopeless." Warren Buffett, through Susan Buffett's foundation, has continued supporting Planned Parenthood and other organizations in the face of fierce criticism from anti-abortion crusaders.

[Case]

America Online founder Steve Case, who is backing research into brain cancer, the disease that killed his brother.

Silicon Valley entrepreneur Steve Kirsch, whose Abaca Technology is a leader in anti-spam technology, goes so far as to engage in political lobbying in support of the causes he feels strongly about. "It's the way we calculate that a smaller foundation can exert the most leverage on the issues we feel are vital," he says. He defines those as things that jeopardize the survival of the planet and the human race—from the curbing of stem-cell research to nuclear weapons and pollution.

Lobbying is integral to this. "I can't move the needle by myself, but I can shape public debate and even policy," says Kirsch, who routinely makes his opinions known to local and state officials. "If you don't affect policy, you're going to be stuck cleaning up the mess for years afterward."

For some, a personal passion goes back to childhood. Joan Weill, who chairs the board of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, first encountered dance as a small child when her mother took her to modern-dance class conducted by Martha Graham's dance company at Carnegie Hall (another organization she and her husband, former Citigroup CEO Sandy Weill, have long supported).

Joan Weill never pursued dance as a career. "I would never have been good enough to do that—though I want to come back as a dancer in my next life!" she says. In her 20s, Weill saw Judith Jamison perform with Alvin Ailey and was so taken with the performance that, in the mid-1990s, she jumped at the chance to work with her idol on the board of the dance troupe.

In 2002 and 2003, she and her husband gave \$18.5 million to support the construction of a new performance venue, which now bears her name. The troupe, she says, "brings together all my passions, for social services and community outreach, as well as for dance."

ART, IN ALL ITS FORMS, clearly can inspire both passions and philanthropy. Donald Rubin, 71, sold MultiPlan, the nation's largest private preferred-provider health care organization, to the Carlyle Group this year after founding it 35 years ago. But he may become best known for the Rubin Museum of Art, which opened in 2004 in the old Barney's department store in New York and showcases works from the Himalayas.

[Dakin Image]

Dana Dakin, who has "adopted" a village in Ghana, shown near her home in Wilmot, N.H.

Rubin and his wife, Shelley, were walking down Madison Avenue in 1974 when they spotted a thangka painting of a female Buddha in a dealer's window. He walked in and plunked down \$1,500 for the painting, likening the experience to falling in love. The Rubins began to voraciously collect the paintings, textiles and sculpture of Tibet and the Himalayas, filling their house and MultiPlan's offices with the stuff.

In 1998, they decided to start the museum—the first in the West devoted entirely to the colorful, dynamic tradition of Himalayan art. Today, it boasts thousands of objects, ranging from the erotic to the deeply spiritual. Rubin, once a longshoreman, now spends a few hours a day in the museum, which cost more than \$60 million. And he still advises the museum's curators on what to buy: "I know something is exquisite in the blink of an eye. It's like dating. I love the feeling. I let myself go."

When philanthropists throw themselves into their causes, the work rarely stops with the writing of a check. One recent day found Donald and Barbara Jonas in a windowless room at the Columbia University School of Nursing, listening to five teams of nursing students relate their experiences with "evidence-based practice," a new, more analytical approach to everything from detecting post-partum depression to managing emergency-room triage.

The Jonases, who are funding a two-year project to explore the approach, took it all in and beamed in approval. "What we are hoping to create," says Donald, "is a group of great nurses who can deliver great care and are so engaged in their profession that they wouldn't consider leaving it. That's what I sense is happening here."

Even a de Kooning over the fireplace can't give that kind of satisfaction.

Leslie P. Norton contributed to this story.

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