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A Donor's Alternative Energy

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Oil heiress Swanee Hunt champions progressive causes.

When Swanee Hunt was a 30-year-old deciding what to call her new charitable foundation, she considered leaving out her last name. She didn't want to go out of her way to remind anyone that her father was H.L. Hunt, the eccentric Texas oil tycoon who was known for his extreme right-wing political views and his disdain for philanthropy.

But then Ms. Hunt, who admits she inherited her father's activist streak, decided the best thing she could do was to create a more-charitable legacy for her family's name. She and her sister Helen, with whom she started her foundation in 1981, named the philanthropy the Hunt Alternatives Fund.

Two decades later, Ms. Hunt believes that her efforts to transform the family's philanthropic reputation have been successful. She gives half her annual income away, which has allowed her to distribute \$50-million to \$60-million so far, she says. And there is still more to give: Ms. Hunt is estimated to be worth several hundred million dollars, largely from her partial ownership in Hunt Oil Company.

Ms. Hunt's philanthropy focuses largely on helping the poor and powerless. During its first 16 years, the Hunt Alternatives Fund made grants to dozens of grass-roots charities in Denver, where Ms. Hunt resided. The philanthropy was known for taking risks on small, start-up groups.

Four years ago the fund moved to Cambridge, Mass., and took on an international role, inspired by Ms. Hunt's four-year tour as the U.S. ambassador to Austria. It operates Women Waging Peace, a project aimed at increasing the role of women in peace efforts and policy making in areas of conflict around the globe, such as Armenia and Azerbaijan, Bosnia, India and Pakistan, Northern Ireland, and Rwanda.

The project is a collaboration between Hunt Alternatives, as the foundation is now known, and Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, where Ms. Hunt directs the Women and Public Policy Program.

Much is left to be done, Ms. Hunt says. "I have a good solid 30 years ahead and this wonderfully rich fabric of relationships and experiences and efforts tried that I can now draw from."

She adds: "To me, philanthropy at its best means bringing together many different voices and finding ways to modulate the ones that are too loud and raising the ones that can't be heard so that you get a balance."

In fact, Ms. Hunt seems to thrive on throwing herself into society's most contentious debates. Says Charles Ansbacher, Ms. Hunt's husband of 15 years and a former trustee of the Hunt Alternative Fund: "Swanee likes confronting tough issues."

'Anti-Philanthropy' Father

Ms. Hunt learned to deal with conflict and controversy early in life. Her father sired three separate sets of children -- 15 in all -- with two wives and a mistress. Ms. Hunt, the youngest daughter of his second wife, was 8 when she moved with her mother, brother, and two sisters into Mount Vernon, her father's estate in Dallas.

Her father never encouraged her to give her money away, Ms. Hunt says.

"Not only was he not philanthropic, he was anti-philanthropy," she says. "He believed that philanthropy would discourage people from developing their entrepreneurial side and from hard work. He said the best thing you can do with your money is to build a business and give people jobs."

Ms. Hunt's mother, however, was deeply religious and quietly contributed to charitable causes. Swanee Hunt shares traits from both parents, says her sister Helen LaKelly Hunt.

"My father was a political activist who was fascinated with the impact of sociopolitical systems on the everyday person, and Swanee did inherit that fascination," says Ms. LaKelly Hunt.

She adds, "My mother, however, had a heart for the forgotten. She believed that the people who were overlooked by society often carried within them the most dignity, the most heart, the most beauty. We were raised with that spirit of love."

When H.L. Hunt died in 1974, his fortune, estimated to be worth \$5-billion, was split between various members of the family.

Although two of his sons, Nelson Bunker and William Herbert, lost much of their wealth in the 1980's through their investments in silver, other family members saw their inheritances grow as they added new investments and businesses.

Ms. Hunt's brother, Ray, for example, runs Hunt Oil Company and is worth \$2.1-billion, according to *Forbes* magazine. An active philanthropist, he and his wife have a family foundation in Texas and have contributed millions of dollars to Southern Methodist University.

Wrestling With Guilt

As a young woman, Ms. Hunt struggled to reconcile her wealth and her upbringing as a devout Southern Baptist with her increasingly liberal political views. She says she found her money more and more troubling as she pursued her education, earning a bachelor's degree in philosophy, master's degrees in psychology and religion, and a doctorate in theology. "There were tears and long walks and attempts to somehow bring together my sense of social justice and my life circumstances and not be paralyzed by the guilt."

In the end she chose to use her wealth to help others. But Ms. Hunt does not romanticize her decision to create a charitable foundation. "I will tell you that money and power do corrupt," she says. "And however magnanimous or generous I may sound, you or I or anybody else could look at the life choices I've made and say, Here are the inconsistencies." She adds, "I would never say that there isn't a big dose of rationalization as to why I should live this comfortable, comfortable life."

Singing and Dancing

Ms. Hunt is now at peace with the choice she made, and she has used her confidence, as well as her ability to think creatively, to help many of her fellow grant makers look for new ways to solve problems.

An accomplished composer, singer, and photographer, she has used those talents to achieve her philanthropic goals. "Swanee has a great ability to humanize what she's doing," says Vincent McGee, vice president of the Irene Diamond Fund, who advised the Hunt sisters on how to set up their foundation and served for 15 years as a board member. "She'll sing or dance or do a pantomime in a conventional group of funders to try to get them to think in different ways."

While serving as ambassador to Austria, she visited Sarajevo and compiled a collection of her photographs of the Bosnian war and published them as a book. Proceeds from the book sales went to help rebuild the homes of refugees. One photo, which was turned into a poster, was used to start a book drive in Austria. The books were sent to Sarajevo to replenish the public library.

Ms. Hunt's other talent is a knack for identifying charities that have strong potential -- even though they have not yet attracted attention. One was Summer Scholars, a Denver literacy program that works to reduce teenage crime and violence by improving kids' literacy skills and encouraging them to stay in school. Hunt Alternatives gave the program \$7,000 when it was getting off the ground in 1993. The charity now serves 1,200 youngsters and has a budget of \$1.5-million.

Ms. Hunt has long been interested in programs that deal with the causes of problems like teenage pregnancy and homelessness.

"She wasn't afraid to do things that were controversial or nontraditional or risky," says David Miller, executive director of the Denver Foundation, who served as vice president of the Hunt Alternatives Fund from 1993 through 1996.

Women's Funds

As her status as a grant maker in Denver grew, she could not help noticing that, while most of the groups she supported were run by women, none of these women were on boards of directors of local foundations distributing money in Denver.

"There was this very obvious imbalance of the political power, the financial power, and who was leading some of the most important work," she says. So in 1985 she helped to create the Women's Foundation of Colorado, a grant-making charity financed primarily by women donors that now has an endowment of about \$12-million. The foundation supports groups that help women achieve economic self-sufficiency.

Ms. Hunt was determined that the board of the Women's Foundation reflect the diversity of those involved -- Democrats and Republicans, rich and poor women, lesbians and straight women, Christians and Jews. It wasn't always easy.

There were disagreements and personality clashes. One staff member left. "Some people are averse to conflict, but I'm not," she says. "Life is so complex that the idea that people of the same experience can understand it is ludicrous," she adds. "If I believe the same thing as a person across the table from me, then one of us is redundant."

Helen LaKelly Hunt, who helped establish similar funds in Texas and in New York, where she resides, eventually decided to focus exclusively on working with women in philanthropy. In 1991, she left the Hunt Alternatives Fund to start the Sister Fund, her own charitable organization.

Absentee Grant Making

Though the split with her sister was amicable, Ms. Hunt's life as a grant maker in Denver went through another significant transformation in 1993 when she was tapped to serve as ambassador to Austria.

During her four years in Vienna, she saw that, while women were hard at work on the ground helping those whose lives were affected by the war in Bosnia, they were all but left out of the official peace process. So when the Kennedy School of Government offered her the chance to direct the new Women and Public Policy Program in 1997, she knew she had to say yes.

She also knew that she could not continue to run the Hunt Alternatives Fund from afar. Although Ms. Hunt had returned to Denver twice a year for board meetings during her stint in Vienna, she quickly discovered that she did not like being an absent grant maker.

"For me, the joy of philanthropy was not just knowing that my money had been given to help other people," she says. "I needed to see their faces, their smiles, their tears, their frowned brows as they explained the problems of the community. Without that close-up connection it was much, much less satisfying."

Still, the decision was a difficult one, especially because many grantees were concerned that the fund's departure would create a philanthropic gap. But that did not turn out to be the case, says Mr. Miller of the Denver Foundation. In part, he says, that is because numerous

staff members from the Hunt Alternatives Fund brought what they had learned from Ms. Hunt to their positions at other grant-making organizations.

"She groomed a lot of people," he says. "It was like she was a training ground for this new philanthropy."

Global Goals

Structurally, the new, Cambridge-based fund bears little resemblance to its Denver incarnation. The fund is now a private operating foundation whose flagship program is Women Waging Peace. But in many ways, Ms. Hunt's latest philanthropic endeavor, which she started in December 1999, is similar to what she was doing in Denver.

She still supports grass-roots groups and works toward systemic changes, but with global goals in mind.

Women Waging Peace is an international network of 200 women -- activists, educators, professionals, religious leaders, journalists, and others -- from 25 regions experiencing conflict, primarily in central and eastern Europe. The women are connected through the Internet, which they use to share information and strategies on how to work for peace and advance women's causes in their countries.

As part of the project, Harvard holds annual two-week international conferences bringing together women activists, academics, ambassadors, and policy makers to discuss ways to involve women more directly in peace efforts.

Influencing Foreign Policy

The organization, which has a \$4-million annual budget, spent much of its first year participating in meetings and conferences with a variety of international organizations.

It is also compiling a handbook of strategies that women in various regions employ in working to resolve conflicts. And the organization plans to expand to other strife-torn regions, including Asia and Central America.

"Women Waging Peace is going to be a major force in creating a new paradigm in foreign policy," says Ms. Hunt, "and that is that the perspective and energy of women is automatically factored in as a major resource in creating stable globalization."

It's an ambitious goal, Ms. Hunt admits. "Many women don't have political power or financial resources."

But, she adds, "they are a tremendous potential resource. What we're doing is trying to figure out where this rich resource can have some leverage."
