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The New York Times

WITH THE International Herald Tribune

SPECIAL REPORT: THE FEMALE FACTOR

The 'Rewiring' of a Former Hollywood Hotshot

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Published: January 26, 2011



Peden+Munk

Sherry Lansing.

MIAMI — In 2005, when Sherry Lansing resigned as chairman of Paramount Pictures, she might well have opted to keep her hand in the entertainment industry.

Ms. Lansing had credentials, and cachet. Not only had she overseen 20th Century Fox, as the industry's first female studio head, but she had also been a successful independent producer, whose credits, with partner Stanley Jaffe, included "Fatal Attraction." During her tenure at Paramount, which began in 1992, the studio financed, among other films, "Forrest Gump" and co-financed "Titanic" with 20th Century Fox.

All the while, Ms. Lansing insists, she had another long unsatisfied yen. And so, when she said goodbye to Paramount, it was a farewell to the movie business.

Next, she threw herself full time into the world of philanthropy — a move applauded particularly by female peers.

"What Sherry did is the most elegant version of moving on to a new phase of a life that I have ever seen," said Amy Pascal, co-chairman of Sony Pictures Entertainment. "Most people love the business, and they are not ready for the next phase. Sherry knew what she wanted, and she went for it from Day 1."

Or as one Hollywood insider, insisting on anonymity, put it: “In Hollywood people generally stay past their ‘sell by’ date.”

Five years ago, Ms. Lansing recently recalled over hot chocolate at a Miami hotel, the relentless pace and endless crises of the movie business were wearing her thin. “I thought: ‘Well, I have been lucky and I have achieved what I wanted to achieve,’” and it was time to move on. (Whether she was also encouraged to do so, neither Ms. Lansing nor others would say.)

Ms. Lansing, in Miami for a meeting of Stand Up To Cancer, a favorite charity she helped to create, is adamant that she had long before set the age of 60 as her deadline for leaving the movie business because she would still be “young enough to have a second chapter.” And after more than three decades in movies, “the highs were not so high and the lows were not so low,” she said

Today, at 66, “this is the payback for all those years of hard work,” said Ms. Lansing, dressed as ever in trademark slacks, sweater and bright red blazer. “Now I can control my own time and my own life.” People still send her scripts in the hope she may be interested, she said, but “I don’t even read them.”

The Miami meeting marked a moment of victory for Ms. Lansing and eight other Hollywood women whose goal was to raise money that would be used to finance cancer research and get treatments to patients much faster. So far, in just under three years, Stand Up To Cancer has raised \$180 million, and on the advice of a team of research experts, given out \$73.6 million to “dream teams” of doctors and researchers across different institutions to research cancer.

At the turn of the year, Johnson & Johnson agreed to work with one “dream team” to bring to market a blood test it had developed that can spot a single stray cancer cell indicating that a tumor has spread.

Stand Up To Cancer is perhaps the best known of Ms. Lansing’s causes because in 2008 she and her colleagues persuaded the three biggest U.S. television networks to give up an hour of prime time simultaneously to entertainers who would raise money for cancer.

In that effort, Ms. Lansing detects shades of the past.

“There are many similarities to the movie business,” she said. “When you go into an established institution, everyone has an idea, and some people think you should not do it.

You have to bring these divisions together, grow together, get passionate and then you have to execute well. That's what it's like making a movie."

Ms. Lansing credits her mother with her own interest in philanthropy. "My mother never turned her back on anyone," Ms. Lansing said. "She always said: 'There but for the grace of God go I,' and helped." Ms. Lansing still recalls going door to door as a teenager to raise money for an after-school center in a poor area.

Even when Ms. Lansing was working full tilt in Hollywood, she found some time for philanthropy. Cancer causes resonated most strongly because she had lost her mother to the disease.

"We did a March on Washington over a decade ago when she was still at Paramount," recalled Ellen Sigal, chairwoman and founder of Friends of Cancer Research, a lead organizer of the march. "We asked her to join us. She said she did not think she could do it, and then she called back the next day and said that she knew it was important and she went on the march."

For more than a decade, Ms. Lansing has also been one of the 26 regents of the University of California, which stewards the 10 university campuses of the California system and its five medical centers.

Over the past several years, she has headed its health services committee where a top initiative has been a project to reopen the Martin Luther King Jr. Hospital in South Los Angeles, originally established in the aftermath of the 1965 riots and the sole public hospital in the area.

With the state under financial pressure, the Board of Regents was worried about unanticipated costs if it agreed to reopen the hospital. "Early on, if the board had voted, it would have voted against the project," said Dr. John Stobo, senior vice president in the division of health sciences and services for the University of California.

Ms. Lansing became convinced that the area needed a public hospital. "It was amazing to watch her," said Dr. Stobo.

Getting support for the project was not unlike getting a studio to approve a film. As Ms. Lansing's husband, the film and opera director William Friedkin, told The Los Angeles Times in 2005: "Sherry has an ideal vision of the world, and that's where everyone is agreeing with everyone, especially her."

According to Dr. Stobo, “Sherry constructed a way to structure the investment so the university system shared the financial risks with Los Angeles County,” he said. “She addressed the issues and found a viable solution. Other hospitals around the country now look at it as model.”

Working in medicine and science, Ms. Lansing says, has been a broadening experience.

She is on the board of the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine that determines the allocation of \$3 billion in state funding for embryonic stem cell research. “I still remember one of my very first meetings,” she said. “They were talking about embryonic stem cells and they were using terms I didn’t know. I asked someone to draw me a picture. It was very exciting. You have this whole new world open up to you again.”

Embryonic stem cell work has created controversy, especially among right-to-life groups, because the most useful cells come from human fetuses. But the California Supreme Court has rejected lawsuits filed against the institute and its board members to stop the state from financing the research.

Not everything is on such a grand scale.

As Ms. Lansing got more involved with a new phase in her life, or “rewired,” as she likes to call it, people asked her how they could do that, too. Out of this came “Encore,” a project to bring retired executives into the school system as math and science teachers.

Among its first backers was Ted Mitchell’s New Schools Venture Fund, which aids organizations that are trying to improve U.S. education.

Encore helped persuade corporations, including I.B.M. and Boeing, to pay for a year of education for retirees that lets them train to become teachers. So far, 600 people have been “rewired” for this.

“When you create little nonprofits, they are like movies” she said. “You think of an original idea, and everyone tells you you’re nuts, but you don’t give up and you communicate your message.”

Ms. Lansing’s new life has some differences. She is pleased that her world now includes doctors and scientists as well as friends from the film industry.

But some things get left out. In the movie business, curse words are used almost as frequently as “and” and “but,” and “people yelled at the drop of a hat,” Ms. Lansing said. “In the nonprofit world, people don’t do that. It is much more civilized.”