

## From Hollywood Exec to Philanthropy Queen

By David Ferrell | June 22, 2012 | [0 Comments](#)



Few Hollywood careers reach the heights that Sherry Lansing's did. Arguably the most powerful woman in show business, she became president of 20th Century Fox at age 35, then led Paramount Pictures during one of the most successful runs in the studio's history. Under her guidance the studio released the Oscar-winning films *Forrest Gump*, *Braveheart* and *Titanic*. But, she knew when it was time to go a different direction.

"The passion that drove me to make movies was waning," says Lansing, whose jam-packed schedule left her with little time for things she began to care more about: leisure travel, enjoying her family and friends, and philanthropic work. "I knew that I didn't want to die at my desk," she says. "I swore that when I was 60 I was going to leave my job."

Lansing kept that promise, and now, at 67, says she feels "reborn" in an encore career packed with some of the most rewarding work she's ever done. Hurling herself into philanthropy, she created the Sherry Lansing Foundation in 2005, a year after leaving Paramount. Through that organization, and also through her service on the governing boards of other nonprofit groups, Lansing has become one of Los Angeles' major players in raising funds for cancer research and supporting public education and the arts.

Those who know her say she excels at identifying problems and bringing together teams capable of solving them. "I guess the way I've approached it is no different than making movies," Lansing says.

"Certain causes are dear to my heart. We go and get partners, try to find people enthusiastic about our ideas and collaborate with them."

Together with television host Katie Couric and seven other women, Lansing co-founded Stand Up to Cancer, which raises money to aid in cancer research and also encourages cooperation among scientific laboratories. Lansing says she has always cared a lot about education -- she currently serves as chairman of the University of California Board of Regents -- but in recent years her interests have expanded to include baby boomers, a population too often dropped from the American work force because of ageism, despite their skills and eagerness to be useful.

With more than 70 million boomers now nearing or reaching their 60s, and life expectancies growing, the question of how that group can continue to contribute is one of the major social issues of our time, Lansing says. "We're the generation that marched for civil rights, that marched for the women's movement, and on and on and on," she says. "And we're going to march to redefine aging."

Lansing says she first began to see the problem following her high-profile departure from Hollywood. As she immersed herself in charity work, she encountered other people her age who had time to give but lacked the training or direction. "People would write me letters or come up to me on street and say, 'I so want to do what you're doing, and I don't know how to do it,'" Lansing says. "I started hearing it over and over again."

In partnership with the Los Angeles Unified School District, Lansing's foundation organized a program to help retirees volunteer in the schools. But since many thousands of boomers need to find paying full- or part-time jobs, Lansing is now working with Steve Poizner, a former state insurance commissioner and one-time California gubernatorial candidate, to set up job courses specifically for people 45 and older.

Set to launch in September as part of the UCLA Extension program, Empowered Careers will offer certificates in 10 types of jobs -- marketing, for example, and information-technology management -- that hold particular promise for boomers because of their existing skills, according to Poizner. The classes will be taught entirely online, with students receiving an iPad so they can learn from anywhere.

"You can scale this up to help people all over the country," says Poizner, who sets a goal of 3,000 participants the first year. Lansing, who was instrumental in enticing Creative Artists Agency to co-found the company, considers it a part of her game-changing mission to help boomers, Poizner says.

"She's visionary -- a very dynamic and inspiring leader," Poizner says. "Sherry has this ability to pull together great teams. She's done it many times in the past. She has this ability to think in a very bold, strategic way. She is that rare person who can think at a very high level about big problems, then get down to the nitty-gritty and help you design your logo."

Lansing broached the concept to him a year and a half ago, and Poizner agreed to serve as CEO of the organization, based in the Silicon Valley town of Los Gatos. Besides being politically involved in California issues, the 55-year-old Poizner had useful experience in launching start-ups; he previously co-founded SnapTrack, Inc., which developed the technology to put global-positioning devices into cell phones. Telecommunications giant Qualcomm bought SnapTrack in 2000 for \$1 billion.

Empowered Careers was organized as a for-profit company partly to attract venture capital -- and so far it has raised \$15 million, Poizner says. It also will help raise funds for the cash-strapped UC system without competing with existing student programs, says Lansing, who vows to funnel any income she might have received from the venture into scholarships.

"What we've done," says Poizner, "is pull together three of California's premier innovation centers -- Silicon Valley working with Hollywood and the University of California -- to focus on people's jobs and the economy."

Lansing, who was born and raised in Chicago, learned to value philanthropy early in life, she says. Her father David, a real-estate investor, died when she was 9, and her mother Margot, though not wealthy, was always willing to help anyone in need, Lansing remembers.

"From the time I was a kid, I learned from my mother to always give back," she says. "It was deeply embedded in me. As I got older, that need got stronger for me than making another movie. It defined who I was."

After graduating from Northwestern University, Lansing worked briefly as a schoolteacher before becoming an actress -- she appeared in the 1970 films *Loving* and *Rio Lobo* -- and later a head script

reader at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. She was 4, and already in the top job at 20th Century Fox, when her mother died of cancer – a heartbreak that ignited her passion for cancer research.

Even while making movies, Lansing helped to raise money for good causes. She arranged for proceeds from the premieres of two major films -- 2001's *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, and 2005's *War of the Worlds* -- to benefit the American Red Cross' Disaster Relief Fund, according to Red Cross spokesman Attie Poirier.

Lansing also collected money for charity through a program of payroll deductions, recalls Lisa Paulsen, president of the Entertainment Industry Foundation, a nonprofit created in 1942 by Samuel Goldwyn, Humphrey Bogart, and other luminaries. Once Lansing wrapped up her career at Paramount, Paulsen recruited her to head up the foundation's board, calling her "a leader among leaders."

"She's very funny, she's kind, she listens a lot. She's a consensus-builder," says Paulsen, who joined with Lansing and Couric in co-founding Stand Up to Cancer. "She's very results-oriented. I couldn't think of anyone else I'd prefer to lead our organization. "Lansing sits on a host of charitable boards -- The Carter Center, former President Carter's Atlanta-based organization to promote human rights; Teach for America, founded to improve education in poor communities; the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine, which deals with funding and ethical standards for stem-cell research and Civic Ventures, Marc Freedman's San Francisco-based think tank devoted to baby boomers and encore careers.

Her schedule is often crowded, she admits. "The day starts at 7 and often finishes at 7," Lansing says. There are committee meetings, subcommittee meetings, speeches to give, budgets to analyze. "But to me, what's so exciting is I can't give you a typical day. "The variety keeps her fresh, she says.

"When I was in the movie business, all my friends were in the movie business," she says. "All I ever talked about was the grosses of a film. Your world gets bigger as you go into a nonprofit. It's a tremendous opportunity to grow and be relevant and feel younger than you've ever felt."

Lansing also has more flexibility than ever. She can make time to read the paper, take walks and hang out with her husband, Oscar-winning director William Friedkin, and their two sons. They have traveled extensively, she says. When Friedkin was shooting his most recent movie (the Matthew McConaughey vehicle *Killer Joe*, due out in July) Lansing was able to join him in New Orleans.

"We went to Africa on safari together," Lansing says. "We were sitting on top of an elephant together as the sun came up. It was magical. We get to have enormous adventures together. It's the happiest time of my life."