

The Miami Herald

Posted on Fri, Jun. 29, 2012

Lynn Wolfson, benefactress to ballet, opera and MDC, dies

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Courtesy of the Wolfson family

Lynn Wolfson

She loved ballet and adored opera, spearheaded the collection of one of the country's best and biggest moving image archives. But Lynn Wolfson's most lasting legacy might prove to be a personal one: instilling a strong sense of community in her children.

"Mom always passed down to all of us that we had a responsibility to the community we lived in," said her son, Louis Wolfson III, a local businessman who is active in various charities. "She believed that you had to nurture and grow your community from the bottom up, and that's how she lived her life."

Said her daughter Lynda Fadel, who is active in arts philanthropy in Los Angeles where she lives: "My mom inspired by doing not just by saying. She was incredibly passionate about what she loved and when

she loved something she wanted to learn everything about it. She certainly passed that on to us."

Lynn Wolfson, member of an established philanthropic South Florida family and a generous contributor in her own right to the art and culture scene of her native Miami, died Thursday. She was 85 and had been ill with various ailments.

At the time of her death, Wolfson was or had served on the board of trustees for the Miami City Ballet, the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts Foundation, and the Platinum Circle of the Greater Miami Opera. She was also co-founder and president of the Lynn and Louis Wolfson II Family Foundation.

Two iconic cultural institutions bear her name: the Lynn Wolfson Stage at the Arsht Center's Ziff Ballet Opera House and the Lynn and Louis Wolfson II Florida Moving Image Archives.

It was the latter which she considered her signature work.

Wolfson co-founded the archives in 1984, along with pioneering broadcaster Ralph Renick and historian Arva Moore Parks, who calls the collection “extraordinary, fabulous, probably the best of its kind.”

If not for Wolfson’s vision, Parks added, the archives might have been lost. “Heaven knows where this collection would be without the Wolfsons’ support and understanding of how important it was. She had a real sense of history.”

The collection, which will soon be relocated to a new building at Miami Dade College’s Wolfson Campus in downtown Miami, is comprised of more than 23 million feet of video and film, all of which will be digitized and made accessible to the public. This includes priceless visual images of major events in American history. Much of the content originally came from then-WTVJ/Channel 4’s library. WTVJ was the first TV station in Florida and part of Wometco Enterprises.

Wolfson’s late husband Louis II, a state representative who died in 1979, ran the television and cable division of Wometco.

In 2009, Wolfson and Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padron signed an agreement transferring the archive to the college and establishing a media center to house the collection. The Lynn and Louis Wolfson II Family Foundation and the Mitchell Wolfson Sr. Foundation have endowed the archives’ ongoing operations and preservation efforts.

Padron called it “one of the most significant gifts ever made” to the college. He described Wolfson as “a passionate and loving person with a deep sense of humanity” who was aware that the collection could be used for the enjoyment and education of future generations.

“The archives have enriched our students’ educational experience and elevated the stature of the college as a place where Florida history is being preserved for future generations,” he added.

Though she married into one of Miami’s best known families — her father-in-law Mitchell Wolfson Sr., was a co-founder of Wometco Enterprises in 1925 — Wolfson did not particularly enjoy the limelight.

“She did things in a very quiet way,” said Cathy Leff, director of The Wolfsonian-Florida International University, a museum founded by Lynn Wolfson’s brother-in-law, Mitchell Wolfson Jr. “She didn’t want to be out there, but she did things. She got stuff done.”

Miami City Ballet Artistic Director Edward Villella first met Wolfson when he moved here in 1986. He and wife Linda developed a friendship with her, and she sometimes came to the Villellas for dinner. Yet, Wolfson was a “very, very private person,” Edward Villella said. “It took a lot to get her confidence and comfort.”

She loved ballet and doted on the local dance company. “We are deeply in her debt,” Villella added. “She was one of the most delightful, witty, bright and generous individuals.”

Bob Heuer, who recently retired as Florida Grand Opera's general director and CEO, admits he was at first a bit intimidated by Lynn Wolfson because of the family's impressive credentials. "But she pretty quickly put me at ease," Heuer said from his retirement home in France. "She'd invite us to sit with her in her box. That's just how she was."

Heuer describes her as the perfect arts patroness. "She didn't impose her ideas. She wanted to know what I thought was important and she supported that."

Wolfson was born Lynn Rabin to Buck and Frances Rabin. Raised in Miami's Shenandoah neighborhood, she was greatly influenced by her mother, a businesswoman who ran the family shoe wholesale business, her son said. As a liberal arts major, she met Louis Wolfson II at the University of Miami.

"He was the love of her life," Louis III said. "When he passed away, I don't think she ever really got over that."

Her children believe her love of the arts stemmed from a personal dream. When Wolfson was younger, and not necessarily with her parents' approval, she went to New York and acted in some summer stock. "She wanted to sing and dance on Broadway, but her mother wasn't going to allow that," Louis III recalled with a laugh.

In the end, that may have proven to be in her hometown's best interest.

In addition to her children Louis III and Lynda, Lynn Wolfson is survived by daughter Franci Jo.

Memorial services are scheduled for 11:30 a.m. Sunday at Temple Israel, 137 NE 19th St. In lieu of flowers, the family suggests contributions to the Lynn and Louis Wolfson II Florida Moving Image Archives, the Miami City Ballet or the Florida Grand Opera.

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