Dr. Carolyn Farb, h.c.

AN ANGEL AMONGST US

by Surinder Moore

Carolyn Farb has dedicated her life to caring for and sharing with others. John M. Tsacrios, Jr., Regional Director of UNICEF, said “Carolyn Farb’s brilliance, heart, and philanthropy are unparalleled. She is truly one of the greatest humanitarians in the world—a renaissance woman with a compassionate and generous spirit.” A native Texan, she is to many the face of philanthropy in every sense of the word. Her commitment and passion has not only won hearts throughout the Lone Star State, but internationally as well.

As a teenager, Carolyn began her volunteer career at Texas Children’s Hospital. As a young mother, with her son Jake by her side, she volunteered on the first public television auction, which raised over $50,000 the initial year and over $1 million by the time the program was off the air. Spending over three decades volunteering for many charities around the globe has put Carolyn on the map as Houston’s very own “First Lady of Philanthropy.” She has raised over $80 million for worthy charities, and has plans to continue her philanthropic activities for years to come.

We already knew of Carolyn’s passion for art when we recently visited her Houston home, designed by famous architect John Staub. To quote Gallerist Wade Wilson, “Her art collection reflects the spirit of an adventurer, one whose innate sense of beauty parallels her understanding of an evolving aesthetic. The works of Robert Rauschenberg, Frida Kahlo, who was part of her collection for twenty-one years, and Rene Magritte exemplify the finest and most important movement in
their careers.
The contemporary works in her collection often reflect her own philosophies from art and life. Moments in the collection document her interaction as the collector with the artist who cast her in the role of muse.”

Inspired early in life by her grandfather, successful businessman Jakie Freedman, Carolyn learned that anything was possible, with no dream too big to realize. Jakie Freedman emigrated from Russia to the United States, where he would found the famous Sands Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. Jakie was and remains her inspiration. The words of the late Houston philanthropist Nina Cullinan, who told her that “she had a calling” for philanthropy, further inspired her to achieve new philanthropic and volunteer fundraising levels.

Carolyn takes a hands-on approach to her causes. Whether she’s personally making phone calls to oncologists for a specific cancer patient or helping raise funds to build playgrounds for children with disabilities, she’s there, reaching out, going beyond the call of duty to make a difference in the lives of so many people. When I asked her about the Meals on Wheels program, where she delivered meals to the elderly, she explained, “People need human contact...I wanted to experience and connect with them.” This good Samaritan spirit has gained Carolyn on-going international admiration, love and respect.

Dr. Farb has a caring heart and a relentless passion that drives the repeated successes not only in achieving fundraising goals but surpassing those goals! She works tirelessly on behalf on the U.S. Fund for UNICEF. She is an international spirit, having been recognized by the Chinese Community
Center for her work on behalf of the disasters in Southeast Asia. Her work on behalf of Neurofibromatosis helped establish a pediatric clinic at MD Anderson Cancer Center, as well as an endowed lectureship in her name, which brings esteemed researchers and scientists annually to talk about their latest work.

One of her most memorable moments came when the families of The Challenger tragedy asked her to help establish a legacy in Space Science Technology in memory of their loved ones. June Scobee Rogers and Jane Smith gave her a magic wand and a pair of flight gloves worn by Commander Chuck Scobee, representing the journey they were to embark upon. The wand and gloves sit proudly in her office to this day. As a result of these initial efforts, there are now over 56 Challenger Learning Centers across the United States and England.

Another precious memory was when her friend and mentor, the late Dominique DeMenil, asked her to raise funds for the Byzantine Fresco Chapel. Dominique was one of Carolyn’s heroines. Together, they enlisted the support of Houston’s finest artists, and raised several hundred thousand dollars for the Fresco Chapel. It is truly a treasure of this city.

Her ability to bring people together to for a common purpose and need is truly unmatched. As a Houston resident, Carolyn has a special interest in preserving the history of her city. She is an activist and is not afraid to stand up for what she believes is right. In order to create awareness about the potential destruction of Houston’s Landmark River Oaks Theater, she gathered a group of citizens wearing
“Save our Shrines” T-Shirts, holding candles in front of the theater. Most recently, Carolyn brought friends together to support actress Fran Drescher’s Cancer Schmancer organization. As a result, a hugely successful fundraising luncheon will be held at Del Frisco’s in New York City.

We asked her what was the key to her fundraising success. Carolyn has a zero budget philosophy. She first assesses the need for the charity then methodically plans every detail to raise the funds needed for the cause. She does not believe in having to spend money to raise money, and tries to have every cost for fundraising events donated outright, either in cash or in-kind contributions. This means simply doing what it takes to make the necessary arrangements, whether it’s having flowers donated for a gala or menus printed for a charity ball event. For a special “one-on-one tutorial” from Carolyn herself, check out her two books, “The Fine Art of Fundraising” and “How to Raise Million, Helping Others, Having a Ball.” The books will give you a behind-the-scenes look at what it takes to build community interest for your cause, tips for a successful chairperson, how to get grants, guides for event planning and much more.

When asked about her greatest accomplishments, she thought for a moment and then shared these with us.

Carolyn was the first person to raise $1 million in a single evening, which she did in 1983 for the Stehlin Foundation for Cancer Research. The star-studded event featured Marvin Hamlisch, Liza Minnelli, Crystal
Gale, Ann Margaret, and Brooke Shields, all of whom donated their time and talents to the event!

Another cancer charity was Marvin’s Million Dollar Dream benefiting MD Anderson Cancer Center. The event featured Don Henley and Lyle Lovett, true sons of Texas, who also donated their talent to that unforgettable night. Everyone involved in the event – Don Henley, Lyle Lovett, Carolyn Farb, and Marvin Zindler – had been touched directly or indirectly by cancer. The event raised $1.5 million for cancer research.

One of her proudest moments was receiving her Honorary Doctorate of Humanities by Northwood University in 2002. Dr. Farb is the recipient of many honors and awards for her philanthropic endeavors, including most recently, the University of Houston’s Chair’s Award, the highest award given to a non-Alumni for distinguished leadership, friendship, and service for the University. Another is the Illustrious Moderns Award presented by the Wedgwood Society of Chicago in recognition of achievements in enriching the Culture and Arts of this age, and UNICEF’s Children’s Medallions of Honor presented by Vanessa Redgrave.

After meeting Carolyn for the first time, we came away in complete awe of her life, her home and her tireless commitment to serving the less fortunate. For days after our visit, we were still (are still) talking about this Angel of a woman. Carolyn has
embraced the underserved in many communities and given 200% of herself. When asked to give us a few parting words to inspire us, she quoted Judy Garland: “Always be a first-rate version of yourself, instead of a second-rate version of somebody else.”

Visit www.carolynfarb.com to read more about Dr. Carolyn Farb’s work and to order her books. Be sure to check out our special Holiday Issue for more about Dr. Farb’s favorite charities where those they serve receive the greatest benefit.

The Carolyn Farb Papers are annually deposited with Special Collections at the University of Houston Libraries. They form a part of the growing Women’s Archives and Research Center (WARC). The Papers document not only Ms. Farb’s tremendous efforts in the field of philanthropic fund-raising but also the activities of Houston Society during the past several decades. http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/uhwarc/00011/warc-00011.html