

## A testament of riches shared

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By Pamela Ryckman  
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Perched 17 floors above Park Avenue, with the traffic barely audible through an open window, Barbara Goldsmith is surrounded by friends. Louise Nevelson and Andy Warhol greet guests beside the door, while in the living-room Stone Roberts mingles easily with Roy Lichtenstein, Donald Sultan, Brian Hunt and Jim Dine. The bestselling author and philanthropist began her career writing about art for Harper's Bazaar and New York magazines and she has known them all.

On the day we meet, Goldsmith serves lemon cake with sparkling water on a silver tray before turning to the books that run floor-to-ceiling along her dining room walls. The one on the top shelf with the purple jacket is *Little Gloria . . . Happy at Last*, her 1980 bestseller about the custody battle over Gloria Vanderbilt, which became a television mini-series for which Goldsmith won two Emmys. And there's *Johnson v. Johnson*, her story of the court battle surrounding J. Seward Johnson's \$500m will, and her novel *The Straw Man*.

Goldsmith's dog Vicky emerges for a nuzzle, and guests learn that she is named for the heroine in *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull*, which occupies a shelf near copies of her recent hit, *Obsessive Genius: The Inner World of Marie Curie*, for which she won the 2006 Science Writing Award.

In spite of her books' robust reviews and runaway sales, Goldsmith is renowned as much for her philanthropy as for her vocation.

"I want to be known as a writer, not as a philanthropist," she says, fingering her chunky jade necklace. "I've been extremely lucky and I take the responsibility of philanthropy as a given, but writing is my profession."

Standing in her sun-soaked eyrie, one realises that Goldsmith's more than five decades as an author and historian inform every aspect of her life, including her charitable giving. Her philanthropy is the result of the same intellectual curiosity and compassion that fuels her writing, and her causes are a natural outgrowth of her professional obsessions.

"Don't things just come up?" she demurs, before explaining how she became devoted to book conservation. "When I was researching *Little Gloria*, I would see documents from before 1850 that were in fine condition, and then there were more recent ones I could barely get to the copy machine before they fell apart. I wanted to know why."

Goldsmith learnt that paper was disintegrating after 30 years owing to high acidity levels in post-Industrial Revolution production processes, and that comparable acid-free paper lasting 300 years could be found for the same price. "It just seemed so clear what we should do."

Back to the bookshelves: Goldsmith beams in a photo from 1989. She's standing with Kurt Vonnegut, Barbara Taylor Bradford and others, holding the *Declaration of Book Preservation*. A zealous Goldsmith galvanised 40 of the most influential trade-book publishers and 2,500 writers to publish only on permanent paper, and eventually secured a \$20m annual increase in the federal government's budget for paper preservation.

These changes will save millions of dollars in future conservation costs and, she hopes, prevent our literary heritage from "dropping down the Orwellian memory hole".

Similarly, Goldsmith created the Freedom to Write Award because she saw something wrong and wanted to fix it. She was working with PEN, the international association of writers, and learnt of authors disappearing, or being tortured and killed. "I just thought if we could turn a major media spotlight on these issues, then governments would be unable to ignore them," she says. The night before we met, Goldsmith received word that Normando Hernández González was being taken from his prison cell to the hospital.

Hernández González, a dissident writer and critically ill Cuban prisoner of conscience, is honoured this year and, if released, will join the 30 of 33 imprisoned writers to be liberated over the past 20 years because of media attention resulting from the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award.

In philanthropy, as with most things, Goldsmith's advice is to follow your passions.

"We live in a world where you can't support everything, so you have to think about what's closest to your heart. I'm at the point where I have staked my territory and I want to do the best job I can and still have a writing life," Goldsmith says of concentrating her charitable works, which include acting as a trustee for the New York Public Library and the American Academy in Rome.

One must prioritise because, according to Goldsmith, philanthropy done correctly requires not only money, but also time and expertise. Taking a tip from her friend and mentor, the late Brooke Astor, Goldsmith says it's important to remain intimately involved with the institutions you support.

"I don't respond well to reactive philanthropy. I don't want to give money to an organisation if I don't know how it's being spent," she says.

This means ensuring funds go directly to the cause, not to administration or to self-congratulatory flourishes. Goldsmith was quick to end her association with a woman who boasted that her philanthropy office, which had been decorated by a top designer, was "so much more chic than that plain place Brooke Astor worked out of".

She admiringly quotes Liz Smith, the gossip columnist and honorary chairman of Literacy Partners, a non-profit organisation: "There will be no goody bags because every cent donated goes right to the work, so you'll have nothing to give away to others, who probably don't want it either," Goldsmith recalls her saying at a dinner.

These days, Goldsmith laments, few people seem to understand the importance of giving wisely, or giving at all. "I grew up in an extremely philanthropic family. I was trained to give back," she says, recalling her father as "a real Horatio Alger story", a man who rose from selling pretzels on Coney Island to become chairman of Pepsi-Cola. "Very few people today understand the quid pro quo, that if you make a billion dollars, you should donate a hospital."

She mentions that in the Bible, Maimonides' highest form of charity is anonymous giving. So why, then, the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award, or the Barbara Goldsmith Reading Room at the American Academy in Rome, or the Goldsmith Conservation and Preservation Laboratories at the New York Public Library, or the Barbara Goldsmith Preservation and Conservation Departments at New York University's Bobst Library?

Goldsmith donates anonymously, too, and she's aware that others exploit naming opportunities for "instant ancestry". But sometimes she thinks strategic recognition has greater impact. "I put my name on places where it will attract more money and where my expertise might draw people to the cause," she says.

A leitmotif in Goldsmith's writing has been the discrepancy between image and reality, and in the past she has been critical of society's cult of celebrity; in her 1983 essay *The Meaning of Celebrity*, she denigrates the use of philanthropy as a publicity stunt.

But Goldsmith is pragmatic enough to understand exploiting fame for good. It was she, after all, who persuaded Norman Mailer and Kurt Vonnegut to help rally Congress for acid-free paper. And it was Goldsmith who, at the request of the former First Lady, first covered the Betty Ford Clinic.

"The First Lady told me she'd been a drunk and she'd needed an intervention and she'd had a breast

removed, and she said: 'I want you to take all that and use my celebrity to put my clinic on the map.' She was very realistic and she understood society. "

So it's not surprising now to see Oprah Winfrey's endeavours in Africa, or Bono sandwiched between Bill and Melinda Gates on the cover of Time magazine. "They're using celebrity in a positive way. "

Goldsmith has achieved a certain celebrity herself, yet she doesn't want to write a memoir and she doesn't care about legacy. "I just want this trip to be as good as I can make it, " she says.

Down a long hall, past bedrooms and an office lined with diplomas and distinctions, is the room where Goldsmith writes. Here she is again, surrounded by friends.

"Here's me and Clark Gable, me and Cary Grant. Of course my grandchildren ask, 'Who are they?' And there's Jacques D'Amboise, there's my editor Bob Gottlieb, and here's the opening of the Brooke Russell Astor reading room, and here's one with the Literary Lions, and here's me and Mailer with our medals, me and Tennessee Williams, and here's Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese. "

On the next wall hangs a striking print of homeless people under the IBM building, signed "un hommage " to Goldsmith by Henri Cartier-Bresson, and a picture of "Sylvette ", the sculpture she persuaded Picasso to donate to New York University, near the photo of Goldsmith taken by Andy Warhol. Snapshots of Goldsmith's three children and six grandchildren sit alongside photographs of the Clintons. "They're all personal, " she smiles.

Like it or not, intended or not, Goldsmith is leaving a legacy - one of art, literature, friends, family and philanthropy. A history still in the making.

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