

Special Feature in:**The Female Factor: Profiles
Adrienne Arsht**

Since moving to Miami a decade ago, TotalBank chairman Adrienne Arsht has helped grow her bank into an institution to be reckoned with. It is her bridge-building and business matchmaking skills, however, and her agenda to help advance social causes in Miami, that have become her hallmark.

By Charles Flowers

The amazing thing about Adrienne Arsht is not what she has overcome. She was born lucky, to exemplary parents who steered her in directions of purpose. Her mother was the first female judge in Delaware, her father a prominent Wilmington lawyer. On the campus of the University of Delaware there is a building named after the family. No, it's not what Arsht has overcome, but rather what she has become in less than a decade: one of the most influential women in Miami, with an extraordinary network of powerful friends, allies and colleagues.

"Our ambassador," is what Miami City Manager Joe Arriola calls her. Arriola – whose son Eddie sits on the TotalBank board – is so taken by her social skills that he hopes to enlist the TotalBank chairman's aid in bringing more foreign trade to Miami-Dade. "We're going to use her as a spokeswoman," he says.

For Arsht, it's been a long trek from Delaware, where she followed her parents' footsteps into the legal profession. She had hoped to go to law school at the University of Pennsylvania, where her father got his degree. However, Penn discouraged women from seeking law degrees there. She attended Villanova instead.

That "micro-inequity" – as Arsht likes to call those small bumps in the road that she feels ambitious women must either level, surmount, or suffer with good humor – shaped one of the determining passions of her life. Today, she has built a legacy of explaining gender differences in business and using them to make business better.

Spend some time with Arsht – as many do at the consummate networker's dinners and breakfasts – and you will likely get an earful of how men and women could work and play better with one another. Talk to her employees and they will tell you gender-difference education goes with the territory at TotalBank, a company with 250 employees and more than \$550 million in assets.

"Adrienne has taught us that it's alright to acknowledge our gender differences," says Lyan Fernandez, an executive vice president at TotalBank. "All of that is subsumed. You recognize it, internalize it and move on. It's a phenomenon I wouldn't have acknowledged five years ago."

As chairman of the Coral Gables-based bank since 1996, Arsht has grown the bank's branches from five to 17. After gobbling up Universal and Florida International banks, the TotalBank logo now covers Miami-Dade from Quail Roost to North Miami. A fireball of energy, Arsht has also helped turn nonprofits like Amigos for Kids and the Miami Performing Arts Center Foundation into effective, well-run organizations. And, as a networker and hostess, she has turned her historic home near Vizcaya into what one Hispanic media executive calls "our embassy." The numerous civic events she has hosted there have included everything from receptions for the leaders of Florida FTAA, Inc., to luncheons for various women's executive organizations.

At the same time, she created a power breakfast institution – Desayuno – a Friday morning gabfest at the Ritz-Carlton in Coconut Grove that attracts people from all over South Florida who know that Arsht will introduce them to valuable and interesting contacts. One recent morning in May, she was playing matchmaker to an executive from UPS's Broward office who was new to South Florida, and at the same time putting a few independent businesswomen in touch with each other. One runs a printing business; the other, a mother of a three-month old, is jump-starting her marketing company after taking a brief time off.

At the adjacent table, the chief Florida fund-raisers for Sen. John Kerry's campaign for President of the United States were talking about "taking Florida back" this November with a woman whose stack of business cards said



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she was director of sales and marketing for something called Christian Vision. Besides the fresh-squeezed juice and scrambled egg whites, the talk ranged from business-card-exchange dull to let's-make-a-deal exciting. Arsht has a few rules of engagement: mostly she asks guests to hold off on the business cards. Her staff will later circulate an e-mail list of those in attendance. And no couples are allowed. "It ruins the dynamic," she says. "If you want to get up on a table and dance, you're not likely to do it if your husband or wife is there," she says.

No doubt that is true in her case. Twenty-four years ago, in 1980, she married Myer Feldman, a man 28 years her senior. Ever the networker, she started a May-December marriage group for couples who had at least a 15-year age difference. She will not agree that her decision to marry was "practical," as a magazine writer once said, but admits it was the only possible way she could join the institution. "I knew I couldn't be married to somebody who didn't accept me for who I am," Arsht, 62, says playfully. "He's an amazing man. Any man – you take a survey – who could be married to me would be considered amazing. It was the only scenario that I knew that I could carry out in a marriage. Because I knew what I wanted to do and be."

She always knew what that was: a woman of influence, who has to create connections between others the way some people have to drink Dom Perignon. Only she says that in her case, "It wasn't a matter of 'must-have.' It was 'must be.'" That drive led to her inclusion on lists such as Who's Who in the World, the Fortune 200 list of top American businessmen and Paine Webber's Women of Influence.

By the time she married, Arsht had already taken a few skidmarks – and given some back – in the worlds of business and law. After three years of practicing law in her father's firm, she took a job for Trans World Airlines in New York as an attorney, working her way up in 10 years to Director of Civic Affairs for the air carrier. Once again, the "micro-inequities" needed her.

"When I left TWA in 1979, I wore a pantsuit into the office and a man lawyer walked in and said, 'God doesn't intend women to wear pantsuits,'" she recalls. "Now, we have probably gotten totally through that." Arsht also recalls the days when judges refused to allow female lawyers wearing pants to appear before them in court. Or when a woman bobbing her hair was a business taboo. "I've lived through every part of that," she says. "When I got married in 1980, The New York Times would not print that I was keeping my maiden name. Nor would they use the designation 'Ms.' Now they print gay wedding announcements. We've come a long way," she muses.

That doesn't mean everything sails smoothly. There's always a question of what to call her. "Now it's a field of chairmen.," she says. "[People say to me] 'So, you want to be called 'chairwoman?' I say, 'chairman's fine.' You pick the hills you're willing to die on."

Asked to comment on Arsht's campaign to bring gender-difference issues into business, University of Miami President Donna Shalala, a savvy survivor of the Clinton Administration and long-time friend of Arsht says simply: "She's very skillful. ... I've known Adrienne for many years. She's smart, caring, a great community leader and a world-class networker. She's just very skillful. I admire her for that."

Arsht has used those skills as an energetic matchmaker, bringing together people from all of her worlds: government, non-profit, nearly every sector of business. Her reference list reads like a who's who of South Florida's power elite – male and female, Hispanic and Anglo, Jewish and Gentile. It includes Armando Codina, chairman of the Codina Group; Jorge Perez, chairman of The Related Group of Florida; and Sherwood "Woody" Weiser, chairman of the Continental Companies and the Miami Performing Arts Center, where Arsht is a key player.

If Arsht is a woman of substance, she is also one of style. Her sandy hair is cut short and she keeps fit from regular workouts with a personal trainer and salsa dance lessons. She has read John Malloy's *Dress for Success* and can quote from it. For this Friday Desayuno, she wears a chocolate-brown business suit with a relatively low-cut black top, and she knows she can get away with it "because it's Friday and I'm a 62-year-old grandmother and it's fun."

Arsht's premeditated dress code extends to her amphibian choice of symbols – the ubiquitous frog that not only shows up as a brooch on her jacket but even in the ad campaigns for TotalBank. "I never leave home without a frog," she says. "I wear them in ... crystal, on ball gowns. I wear them everywhere. [The metaphor] is something I use when I talk to young women in business (an allusion to the saying, 'To find a prince, you have to kiss a lot of frogs.') You have to persevere and not give up and not take 'no' personally."

When an idea catches fire with Arsht, she's quick to jump in. When Miami Heat vice president Kim Stone was working to establish the Miami Sol's entry into the Women's National Basketball Association, "Adrienne jumped in

the deep end and helped us set up relationships," Stone says. "She was one of the first people to call and say, 'How can I help?'"

"There's another side of Adrienne," says Jorge Plasencia, a vice president at Univision who chairs Amigos for Kids, a charity that helps abused and neglected children. "She has a huge heart. When she's your friend, she genuinely cares about you. She puts her money where her mouth is." Plasencia is one of several young, 30-something faces on the TotalBank board of directors. Other members include Rhonda van Gates, a black lawyer who is involved in the Overtown Youth Center, and Pablo Cejas, whose cause is the Miami Art Museum. The chairman's support of their causes gives them what Arsht calls "more leverage."

"Within my own bank, I said to the top 10 officers that, for up to \$1,000 they give to charity, I will give \$2,000," Arsht says. "They decide whatever it is, and I will send a double-match check. It gives them a little more clout."

That strategy has already helped improve the service at the Miami Rescue Mission, where she and Mayor Alex Penelas served dinners last Thanksgiving. "I just think Adrienne is a very special person in our community, a great addition," says Miami City Commissioner Johnny Winton. "She doesn't have a political agenda. But she does have an agenda to get people involved, to show them that they can make a difference. Especially young leaders."

Arsht got involved in Miami-Dade community organizations with almost warp speed after she moved her permanent home to the area in 1996. For some people, the brash newcomer moved too fast.

After serving as treasurer (1997) and secretary (1998, 2000) of The Beacon Council, Arsht was ready to move up to the head table when she was named chair-elect. But the Council, apparently concerned that she would shake things up too much, decided to give the chairman's role to another member.

"My style of leadership wasn't for that moment, and since I never had the opportunity to lead, we'll never know," says Arsht carefully, but with hurt in her eyes. "At the time they felt like somebody else could lead the organization better." She is now affiliated with the Miami Business Forum, among many other business and diplomatic groups.

"She's a bridge-builder between the different communities," Plasencia says. "She's become this catalyst for many important opportunities that will have a lasting impact on Miami. I see her home as our embassy. She's at the center of it all."

Last October, one of those bridges led Plasencia and 50 of Arsht's closest friends to board a charter plane to Wilmington, Delaware, where they attended a memorial service for Roxanna Arsht, Adrienne's mother. They saw the home where Adrienne grew up, the building named for the Arsht family at the University of Delaware, and plans for the performing arts center that will be named for her mother.

After her sister's suicide 30 years ago, Adrienne and her parents decided to leave the Arsht fortune to the Delaware Community Foundation upon her mother's death. Adrienne is the foundation's adviser.

Arsht recounts how she felt when she first took on the role. "I am now flooded with suggestions," she says. "I don't live in Delaware. I get the Delaware paper. How am I going to do this? I took a step back and said, 'I know about certain philanthropies, I know about the Cuban-American National Council, I know about Amigos, I know about the Hispanic Scholarship Fund. I studied that here, because those were the organizations that are here. I know how to work with them ... I found that of the 800,000 or so people in Delaware, [there are] 37,000 Hispanics. I did my research. There's a chunk of them in Southern Delaware that are the migrant workers. The Hispanic Scholarship Fund will set up a scholarship fund for them. They will set it up and I will fund it."

"I was raised that your reason for being was to give back," she continues. "I think that life on earth is a gift, and I was blessed to live in a high-rent district. Where I live, how I live ... I owe somebody a lot of rent for the good life I have. That rent is what I can do for others."

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