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Stephanie Blank





Blank Check For Nonprofit

by **Melanie Lasoff Levs** photography by **Pelosi & Chambers**

Stephanie Blank has the funds to provide better lives for needy Atlantans. But it's her passions for children and for independence that drive her.

It's hard to picture Stephanie Blank cleaning out horse stalls. But when she was 12 years old, that was her first job. Growing up in a middle-class home in Blowing Rock, N.C., there wasn't a lot of money for extras. So her parents, Bill and Glenda Howard, taught Stephanie and her brother Will the value of work.

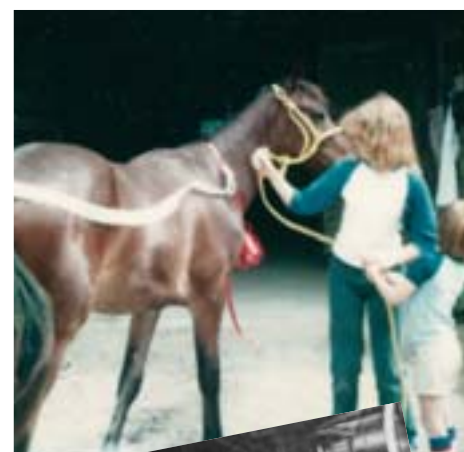
And work Blank did. "That job at the stables was tough," she remembers,



perched on an elegant flowered couch in the sitting room of her Buckhead home, family photos surrounding her. “I don’t know if you’ve ever mucked out a horse stall, but you do 10, 15 of those a day, feed the horses, groom them, saddle them — it’s really hard, physical work.”

Blank has come a long way from that job. Twenty-three years later, she and her husband, Home Depot founder and Atlanta Falcons owner Arthur Blank, pay someone else to clean the stalls of their horses — on their 4,000-acre guest ranch in Montana. But Blank still remembers from where she came. Physical labor “is the kind of thing I want my children to have the opportunity to do,” she says of son Joshua, 6, and her 2-year-old twins, Max and Kylie. “It’s very humbling to realize that that’s what makes this country go around, the people who do such hard, physical labor for all of us.”

This is the way Blank, the 35-year-old girl-next-door-turned-millionaire-businessman’s-wife, both thinks and lives. One minute, she acknowledges the irony of her son winning



Stephanie Blank grabs the reins as a young girl. As a high school student, Blank takes photos of children visiting Santa at the local mall. (bottom)

deal with it and move on,” Blank says. “I don’t believe in dwelling on things too much.”

That’s easier said than done, she adds. That is especially true when dealing with such “things” as allegations against her husband of sexual discrimination. This past July, the former vice president of human relations for the Falcons filed a federal lawsuit claiming she was fired after speaking out against work conditions for women.

Blank is adamant that the allegations are untrue and she says the lawsuit is a personal attack on her family. “There’s no validity to it,” she says. “It’s very frustrating that the family and everyone who works with the family has to go through this. That’s what gets me. It makes me angry I even have to waste time discussing this because it’s not even true.”

What is true is that her husband “surrounds himself with strong, capable women,” Blank says, adding that one third of the Blank Foundation’s officers are women and the foundation grants funds to programs that promote diversity

“To the extent of which my life is somewhat

\$100 in an art contest. The next, she’s leading multimillion-dollar fundraising drives for causes such as Atlanta’s new children’s museum or Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta (CHOA). But all the time, her passion for community service and philanthropy has made her an independent woman, out from under the spotlight that constantly follows her family, thanks to her husband’s high profile.

The Buzz

“Having my own identity is very important to me,” she says, as her children, their nannies and the family’s two dogs move in and out of rooms around her. And how does she describe herself? She is thoughtful for a moment. “I’m very stubborn,” she reflects. “I have strong convictions. If I believe in something, I stick by it.”

She also describes herself as resilient. “I am very much [of the philosophy that], ‘If this is what life throws you, you

and prevent discrimination. “He’s raised two older daughters who are independent, professional young women, he married in me a woman who is independent and strong-minded, and he hires women like that — that’s what he builds and supports.”

Buzz such as this swirls around the couple constantly. Most of it is about what Stephanie Blank calls “the younger, older thing.” Stephanie is 35. Arthur is 61, has adult children close to his wife’s age and grandchildren close in age to his own children with his wife. Stephanie knows she frequently is referred to as a trophy wife. She knows people talk. But, she insists, she doesn’t care.

“I try not to get upset about it,” Blank says. “The people I really care about are our close friends and family. I know how his children feel about me and I know how our friends feel and the rest is just public opinion. I certainly can’t live my life worrying about that.”

Although their high visibility can be stressful — she says she is private by nature — Blank sees it as an opportunity, especially since the family is Jewish. “I know prejudice still exists, that people still have certain misconceptions about Jewish people,” says Blank, who converted to Judaism before their marriage and admits some of that prejudice existed in her own Presbyterian family. “I feel an enormous responsibility to serve as an example, to not do anything that would bring a negative light on any of that.”

Blank immersed herself in her new faith as passionately as she does her philanthropic endeavors. “Most of us grow up in our family’s religion and never really get into questioning why we are what we are,” she says. “Going through that process of examining my faith was an eye-opening experience for me.”

While studying the history, rituals and traditions of Judaism with Rabbi Donald Tam of Temple Beth

furthering one of the main tenets of Judaism: philanthropy. As a trustee with the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation, she plays a vital role in deciding where the family’s millions go. As the wife of a football team owner, Blank has rallied the players’ wives and begun working with the cheerleaders to help improve their image.

Almost all of her projects in some way relate to making the world a better place, she explains. “I want to make a difference,” she says simply. But her drive goes deeper. “I don’t like being told there’s not an answer to something or, ‘this can’t be done’ or ‘that’s not fixable,’” Blank says. “That makes me want to get involved even more.”

In 2001, her drive led Blank to meet with Pat Turner, then president and CEO of a proposed children’s museum downtown. Blank committed \$1 million from the foundation to help build the facility, and

of a fairy tale, I couldn’t have imagined.”

Tikvah in Roswell, Blank says she realized something profound. “All along, my relationship has been with God,” she explains, and when she converted, “that wasn’t going to change. It’s a little bittersweet for me around the holidays, because I love all the old-fashioned Christmas traditions. But I decorate the heck out of Hanukkah.”

Her conversion came with mixed emotions for her Blowing Rock family, Blank remembers. “They agreed [the Blank] family should be unified, but it’s not easy to see your child go from the faith you had into another one,” she says.

Close To Her Heart

When she is not spending time with her children — such as taking time from an interview to create a scavenger hunt for Joshua and a friend — Blank is

to Turner’s surprise, Blank also volunteered to chair the \$11.5 million capital campaign. She and other fundraisers made hundreds of phone calls, sent as many letters, and she spent hours researching and studying how other foundations work. “We really had to have our ducks in a row,” she says.

This was right up Blank’s alley, says Turner, adding that they have become friends. “She could go out and really articulate the need for a children’s museum,” Turner says. “She’d done her own research, understood the issues and was passionate about them.”

Why take on such a project as building a children’s museum? “I was bothered by the fact that we didn’t have anything like that in Atlanta,” Blank remembers, adding that the Blank Foundation and others had been funding a “museum without walls” to make up for it.

Stephanie’s Projects

Following her passion for child welfare and quality-of-life issues in Atlanta, Stephanie Blank has taken the lead in securing funds from the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation for many organizations including these:

■ **Whiteford Community Program** (approximately \$1 million): Situated in East Atlanta, this converted house offers support services to the 6,000 residents, including a health and dental clinic, family resource center, violence prevention and education program.

■ **Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta** (\$200,000): This grant to the CHOA Foundation supports expansion of the Center for Advocacy and Protection to detect, treat and prevent child abuse 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

■ **The Jane Fonda Center** (\$5,000): This grant to the Jane Fonda Center at Emory University in partnership with CHOA helped support a conference for Georgia physicians on the evaluation, treatment and referral of abuse in children and adolescents.

■ **Anti-Defamation League** (\$21,000): This grant supported a pilot initiative to bring the ADL’s nationally recognized World of Difference program to Fulton County schools.

■ **Atlanta Symphony Orchestra** (\$15 million): Blank serves on the architectural advisory committee for the new Symphony Center.

■ **Zoo Atlanta** (\$2 million): This grant supports conservation and education programs, including the panda exhibit.

■ **Imagine It! Children’s Museum Of Atlanta** (\$1 million): Blank headed the museum’s capital campaign to raise \$10.5 million more.

(top) Blank seen here leading the children's museum capital campaign, (middle) with husband Arthur and former President and Mrs. Carter, (bottom) with Blank Foundation co-vice presidents Deva Hirsch (center) and Elise Eplan (right).

Thanks in part to Blank's commitment, Imagine It! The Children's Museum Of Atlanta opened on March 1 to an overwhelmingly positive response. The museum exceeded its goal of 800 family members, reaching 2,600 members by September, and donations continue to pour in. "The neat thing about Stephanie in this particular endeavor is she's the mother of three consumers," Turner says, adding that Blank often brings suggestions to staff and asks questions.

At press time, Blank continues to run campaign meetings and raise funds. She may consider being on the board, if asked, once the campaign is over. "I didn't do this just to see it up and running and then walk away from it," she says.

That attitude illustrates Blank's personality, according to Turner, who points out, "She's not a check writer. She thinks about how she might make a contribution [to issues she cares about] in time, intellect and money."

Real and Genuine

That is how Blank treats all of her projects, including another dear to her heart: Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. She has firsthand experience with the organization: When Joshua was 1 year old, he had surgery there, and last year, Max was treated for viral meningitis. While the experiences were traumatic, the staff there "took as good a care of us as they did [the children]," Blank says.

It takes \$1 million per day to run CHOA, and at least \$40 million per year to cover care for families who cannot pay, since CHOA never turns a child away, she explains. To help with its massive capital campaign, Blank serves on the foundation board, which works on fundraising. "I don't ever join a board if I don't feel very strongly about the work they're doing," she says. "It has to connect personally with me in some way and CHOA definitely does."

Blank was instrumental in securing funding for 24-hour service at CHOA's Children's Advocacy Center at Scottish Rite for sexually and physically abused children. When she had toured the center as a member of the foundation board, Blank says, "I was amazed at the work they were doing in this tiny little place." But they only had the funds to be open during weekday business hours, leaving needy children during off-hours to be seen by pediatricians not often trained to deal with abused children.



When Blank brought this plight to the attention of the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation trustees (which include Blank's grown children from a previous marriage) in the spring 2002, they not only funded the program to run 24 hours a day, but also provided money to another program that trains doctors to recognize signs of abuse.

Blank's concern for children is evident, says Gene Hayes, president of the Children's Healthcare of Atlanta Foundation. "It's refreshing, it's so real and genuine," he says, adding that Blank also sits on the campaign council, a group of community volunteers that will lead CHOA in its next campaign. Hayes says he is struck by Blank's genuineness and willingness to bring more "people of means" to CHOA.

Concern for children and society also led her to bring the Anti-Defamation League's World of Difference program to the Blank Foundation's attention. World of Difference, to which the foundation gave \$21,000 for Fulton County public schools, gives young adults skills to respect diversity, confront prejudice and prevent bullying. "The child who is abused becomes a bully when he is 12, commits petty crime when he's a teen and more serious stuff in his 20s," Blank says. "Society pays a huge cost."

Born Leaders

Society also pays dearly for air pollution, another quality-of-life issue about which Blank is passionate. In September, she and her friend Laura Turner Seydel launched Mothers and Others for Clean Air, not related to the Blank Foundation. The group will offer

education for consumers and families on issues such as the best times to exercise, whom to write to express concern about air pollution, green power and products good for the environment. "These are things I think about," she says, adding that while the Clean Air Campaign focuses on businesses, this program will focus on education for families.

It's that family unit — and most often the women who head it — that holds the key to improving the world, Blank explains. "If we are going to make the necessary changes in our society for it to function in a more healthy manner, it's going to be done by more women getting involved," she says. "Women bring a different empathy to a lot of situations, more of a human aspect."

Women draw on their own experiences to respond to societal needs, Blank believes, citing Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) — created by a woman who lost her son in a drunk driving accident — as one example. "Women use that compassion, that zeal, that 'protective-mother' energy to go after issues in a very single-minded way and can make great change from that."

Women's juggling ability also makes them effective leaders, she explains. "We are used to taking care of our kids, our husbands, our parents, our jobs, household stuff. We know how to take these individual elements and bring them together and manage them. Leaders have to be able to multitask and women are born multitaskers. Therefore, they can be born leaders — if given a chance."

Blank herself hopes to get that chance. She acknowledges that her husband casts

Stephanie and Arthur at their Montana ranch.



a very large shadow. "He's an amazing person, incredibly dynamic and involved," Blank says about Arthur. But she takes pride in her own involvement, as well. "I hope at some point that the work I've done — and not just that of my husband — stands out strong enough that when I speak about an issue, people respect what I have to say because of things I've done in the community."

As Blank continues her community service, she looks toward the future. Eventually, she says, she would like to go to graduate school to study why people commit violent acts. Because she loves to sing, she wants to take voice lessons and maybe even record a CD of children's songs. Blank says she also will continue to focus on her priorities: her family, friends and philanthropy. It's all a far cry from the horse stalls of Blowing Rock. But, she says, she wouldn't have it any other way.

"To the extent of which my life is somewhat of a fairy tale, I couldn't have imagined," she says. "There's a lot of stress that comes with this life, a lot of expectation, but there's a lot that's really wonderful about it — the opportunities I have, the security my family has, the beauty that surrounds us. It's all pretty amazing." ☞