

# PRIVILEGE

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## Rewriting Her Script

**SHERRY LANSING, THE FIRST WOMAN TO HEAD A MAJOR STUDIO, HAS LAUNCHED HER NEW CAREER—MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE**

**I**n a classic, three-act movie script, the hero calls upon his or her skills to overcome obstacles and ultimately triumph, against all odds, in the end. Sherry Lansing is beginning what she calls her “third chapter,” and perhaps it’s fitting that the former Chairman and CEO of Paramount Pictures is succeeding in her new life due to skills she acquired in her previous one.

Last February, Lansing famously walked away from three decades in the movie business and her job as studio chief to pursue other interests. But this was no *Variety* doubletalk, no cover-up for being pushed out due to dipping box office grosses. “I always said I would leave the studio when I was 60,” Lansing says. “It’s a good demarcation point, and a wonderful opportunity to start a third chapter in my life. I said that if I had been able to achieve my dreams – and I have – and was lucky enough to be economically secure, I’d leave so that I could give back.”

To accomplish that goal, she founded the Sherry Lansing Foundation and immersed herself full time in philanthropy. Lansing bankrolled the private foundation herself, and it supports cancer research and a variety of educational causes for preschool to 12th grade. The foundation, which “seeks to make the world a better place,” began its work last spring.

“This is my favorite office in the world,” Lansing says, welcoming me to the home of her foundation, high up in a Westside office tower, and to her spacious, light-filled room with its

Alex Berliner and Eric Charbonneau/Berliner Studio/Elmages



## On The Town

For years before she started her foundation, Sherry Lansing has gracefully maintained a frequent presence at charity fundraising events as well as Hollywood parties.

Above, from left: With Annette Bening at the Hollywood Reporter's annual Women in Entertainment Power Breakfast 100; with Samuel L. Jackson at the Paramount ShoWest dinner; with Hilary Swank at the Big Brothers Big Sisters 10th annual Future Fund Scholarship brunch at Lansing's home; with Uma Thurman at the premiere of Paramount's *Paycheck*; and with Gwyneth Paltrow at the world premiere of *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* to benefit American Film Institute.



Sherry Lansing, her husband William Friedkin and Andrea Van de Kamp at a \$1 million fundraiser for the Music Center Education Division



Sherry Lansing with, from left, Cedrick, Jack and William Friedkin at the Arthritis Foundation benefit honoring her husband

paintings by Francis Bacon and an eclectic mix of decorative items including a crystal trio of “see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil” monkeys. “You can see the mountains, downtown, even the ocean,” she says.

### Role Model

“It’s the happiest time of my life,” she says, given to superlatives on this lovely Southern California mid-summer day. Lansing, statuesque and looking significantly younger than her 61 years, practically bubbles with energy, and her pinstriped blue suit brings out the sparkle in her bright blue eyes.

For her third chapter, Lansing looked for inspiration in figures like Jimmy Carter, the former President who went on to perhaps greater fame and success out of office with his philanthropic work. He has been her role model – a man who seemingly gives back not only nonstop, but in so many ways. “He called and said, ‘We’d like you to join the Carter Center,’” Lansing says. She said yes, naturally, and now works with him as a member of his foundation’s board. She also works with several other high-profile groups in addition to running the Sherry Lansing Foundation.

A synopsis of her current résumé shows that Lansing is the Patient Cancer Advocate for the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine, a new state agency resulting from the passage of Proposition 71 and responsible for funding stem cell research. She is also a Regent for the University of California, sits on the board of Friends of Cancer Research, and is a trustee of the American Association for Cancer Research. Previous involvements with other charities and groups have been scaled back to allow her to devote full attention to what she deems most crucial.

The battle with cancer has personal meaning for Lansing: she lost her mother to ovarian cancer. “I’m three years younger than my mother when she died,” Lansing says. “For her death to have had meaning, I needed to become a cancer advocate. I don’t have the brains or the time to go to medical school, but I can give time and money.”

Though California’s new stem cell program is bogged down in lawsuits, Lansing, who now totes scientific papers rather than scripts wherever she goes, remains an optimist about its future.

### The Moviegoer

Does she miss the film business? “I still love movies, and I go to see them on the weekend so I can cheer on my friends in the business.” Lansing goes to Westwood and buys a ticket, just like any other movie-goer. She was never one to watch films in isolation in studio screening rooms. “I always went to Westwood,” she says, “because I liked seeing films with the public.”

While Lansing’s love of movies hasn’t faded, it has been replaced by her charity work. “I’m now doing something that I love as much as I ever loved movies, if not more, at least at this time in my life.”

Beyond work, Lansing has found time for family and friends. She married director-writer-producer William Friedkin 14 years ago and lives with him and his two sons from a previous marriage. While she still gets out of bed at 6 am to exercise, a holdover from studio days when she’d read scripts or call the East Coast while on the treadmill, Lansing can now take time off from work and not feel guilty.

### For Your Soul

“I set my own pace, my own structure,” Lansing says. “I’m free to do what I want to do.” She’s gone river rafting, “something I’d wanted to do my whole life but never had the time.” Her most important excursion was further afield. “My husband directed an opera in Israel, and I spent four weeks there with him. Living in Israel was a life-affirming, life-changing experience.”

## “I’ve never been happier. I have balance and spontaneity in my life for the first time.”

In Israel, Lansing did engage in some work, visiting with stem cell researchers. But it was primarily a personal trip. “I do not feel guilty about taking this time off,” she says, a new take on life for her. “You need to do good for you own soul.” She’ll again travel with her husband in October, when he goes to Italy to direct *Aida*, and then to St. Petersburg in June.

Whatever she’s doing, it seems to be working for her. “I wake up every day with a smile,” Lansing says. “I’ve never been happier. I have balance and spontaneity in my life for the first time. And I’m learning every day.”

Lansing, who had a reputation for returning every call in her studio days, seems to have that effect on others. When I call a couple of power brokers to talk about her, I either get them on the phone right away, or they call back quickly.

“Sherry has brought to the board a large corporate perspective and a can-do perspective,” says Bob Dynes, President of the University of California System. “She has been a terrific Regent, committed and enthusiastic.” Lansing’s duties include chairing the University Health Service Committee, which focuses on the future of health care in California. “There are a lot of times when I pick up the phone and we talk,” says Dyne. “I sometimes just need somebody who has corporate savvy, and she’s always enthusiastic and available.”

California State Controller Steve Westly recently selected Lansing for a position as cancer advocate on the new Stem Cell Research Committee. “I talked to people in the field, and her name came up again and again. It was clear to me that here was someone passionate about finding a cure,” he says. “And she also brought the sort of executive skills and understanding of how government works that the committee really needed. Sherry, perhaps more than anyone, has helped move things forward.”

Moving things forward is something Lansing has always done, first in film and now in other circles. She’s also now moving forward in her own life, something she had perhaps put on hold during her previous chapter. But if, as she jokes, “60 is the new 50,” she has plenty of time. ■

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Lansing and Shelley Reid cohosted the American Food & Wine Festival for cancer research in July



Sherry Lansing with Sidney and Joanna Poitier at the Music Center benefit