

# SSU gets \$12 million donation for Green Music Center

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Published: Tuesday, March 22, 2011 at 11:32 a.m.



Philanthropists Joan and Sandy Weill are donating \$12 million to Sonoma State University for completion of the Green Music Center, the university announced Tuesday.

Described as the largest single cash gift in SSU's history, the donation ensures a fall 2012 opening of the center, with its 1,400-seat Tanglewood-style concert hall named after the Weills.

Sanford “Sandy” Weill is a former chief executive of Citigroup, which he built into the world's largest bank before the financial meltdown of 2008, and is a nationally recognized philanthropist.

Weill, 78, and his wife, 76, both classical music lovers, said they have donated \$800 million to arts, health care, educational and social service organizations.

The Weills, whose primary residence is New York City, bought a 362-acre estate in the hills west of Sonoma for nearly \$31 million last year, believed to be a record price for a real estate deal in Sonoma County.

“We love to be involved in the communities where we spend time,” Sandy Weill said in an interview Tuesday on the concert hall stage.

When the couple first toured the Green Center late last year and heard a student piano, violin and cello performance, Sandy Weill said they were impressed by the “sound of the music filling the hall.”

To confirm their impression, the Weills asked Chinese concert pianist Lang Lang, a friend, and Carnegie Hall Executive and Artistic Director Clive Gillinson to check out the towering concert hall.

Gillinson “thought it was phenomenal,” said Sandy Weill, who is chairman of the Carnegie Hall board of trustees.

Weill said the concert hall will give Sonoma County a “terrific” economic boost, adding a “world class cultural destination” to an area that has “world-class wines and world-class weather — not counting March.”

Joan Weill said she thinks the SSU facility is “a little better” than Tanglewood, the Boston Symphony Orchestra's acclaimed summer home in the Berkshire Hills of Massachusetts.

SSU President Ruben Armiñana, who has sustained the financial push for the center for more than a decade, said, “very soon, this majestic new facility will be available to all.”

Arminana was at a California State University trustees meeting Tuesday in Long Beach seeking approval of the name Joan and Sanford I. Weill Hall.

Since the center's groundbreaking in 1997, projected costs have grown more than tenfold, to about \$120 million, and faculty critics say it has diverted money and attention from SSU's academic mission.

Major funding for the center includes \$62 million in donations, including the Weills' gift, and about \$45 million from taxpayers in the form of California State University funds and educational bond monies for construction projects.

Noel Byrne, a sociology professor, said the project “was a mistake to begin with” but now cannot be undone.

“There is no going back,” Byrne said, characterizing a failure to complete the center as a “Pyrrhic outcome” that would benefit no one.

Byrne said he believes the center will not be financially self-supporting and will require continued fund-raising efforts by the university's development office.

“I would be happy to be wrong,” Byrne said.

Another faculty critic, Steve Orlick, a professor of environmental studies and planning, said he had “no problem with rich people giving piles of dough to the university,” but predicted the center will be an ongoing financial drain on SSU.

“It's a folly,” he said.

The music center was first envisioned as a choral hall to be funded by a \$5 million gift from Telecom Valley pioneer Donald Green. Nine months later, Armiñana announced a further \$5 million matching grant from the Greens.

The concept grew to include a year-round amphitheater for conferences, symphonic performances and jazz and chamber music performances. It should, Armiñana suggested, be modeled after Tanglewood.

By 1998, the goal was for a larger concert hall costing \$22 million. A year later, the projected cost was \$47 million and the facility was to house SSU's music department. It was to include classrooms, practice rooms, recording facilities and a recital hall, a restaurant and banquet facilities.

Green and his wife Maureen had been the largest donors, with contributions to the center that bears their name totalling \$11.5 million, according to the university.

Other major donors with long-time Sonoma County ties include Jean Schulz, wife of Peanuts cartoonist Charles Schulz, \$5 million; Evert Person and his wife, Norma Person, former owners of The Press Democrat, \$3 million; telecommunications executive John Webley and his wife, Jennifer Webley, \$2.1 million; Herb Dwight, one-time CEO of the former Optical Coating Laboratory and

his wife, Jane Dwight; \$1.2 million; the Trione Foundation, founded by financier and businessman Henry Trione, \$1 million.

The Weills said they were impressed by the millions donated to the center and Armiñana's vision of a university home for the performing arts venue.

“He really stuck to it and pursued it,” Joan Weill said.

Sandy Weill, a Brooklyn, N.Y. native, was viewed as a brilliant dealmaker for assembling Citigroup, hailed by Fortune magazine in 2001 as one of its “10 Most Admired Companies.”

But after Weill left as CEO in 2003, Citibank was embroiled in the subprime mortgage meltdown that saw its shares fall from \$55 in 2007 to about \$1 in early 2009. The company received a \$45 billion federal bailout.

Joan Weill, who is chairwoman of the board of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Foundation, was also born in Brooklyn but grew up in the San Fernando Valley.

The Weills' gift will make possible completion of the concert hall, which held its first public event in October, as well as two other performance venues.

The south end of Weill Hall features a back wall that can be opened to a terraced lawn, accommodating an additional 3,000 guests.

Weill Commons, an area directly east of the main concert hall, will become a 10,000-seat amphitheater for large outdoor events.

The Weills' \$12 million gift includes \$4 million for completion of the 14,000-square-foot concert hall, which will be home to the Santa Rosa Symphony, \$4 million for landscaping the outdoor facilities and another \$4 million for the landscaping in the form of a challenge grant to be matched by other donors.

Patricia McNeill, SSU vice president for development, said she expects to raise the matching \$4 million in three months. “We are confident the community will respond,” she said.

The 4,500-square foot Schroeder recital hall, which is \$6 million short of completion, is not included in the Weills' gift.

The Weills, married for 55 years, are recipients of the 2009 Carnegie Medal of Philanthropy Award.