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Diana Widmaier Picasso

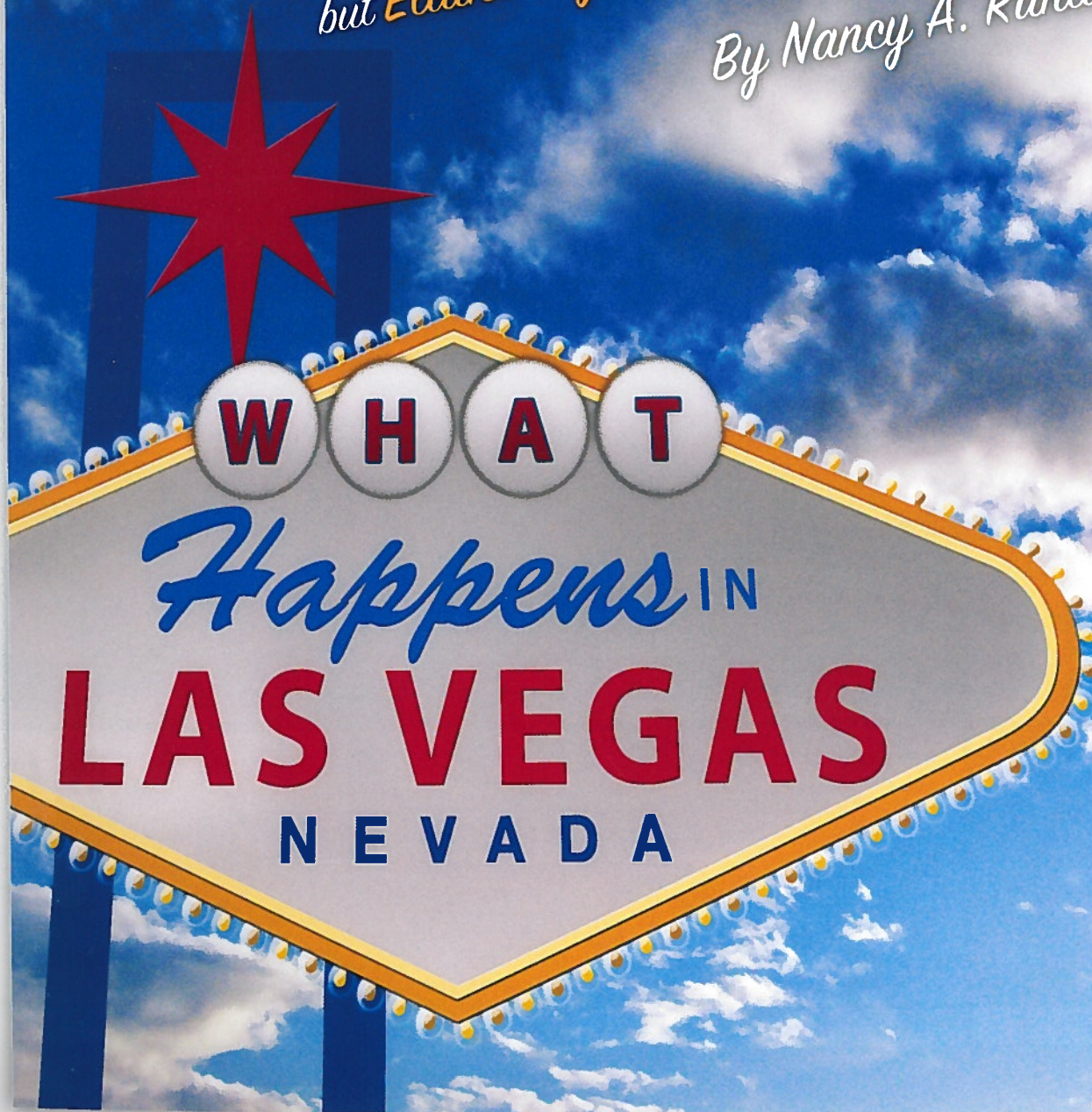
PICASSO. PERIOD.

THE MASTER'S GRANDDAUGHTER REVEALS HIS GREATEST MUSE.

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*Her name may be synonymous with the Strip,
but **Elaine Wynn**'s legacy is about to be built.*

By Nancy A. Ruhling





On the round dining table, there's a circular serving tray. It contains a carafe of Perfect Peach iced tea, four crystal glasses resting on white paper napkins, and a bowl of ice. Next to it, there's a bowl of lime wedges, a tray of chocolate-chip cookies, and a bowl of mixed nuts. A multi-line phone, next to a pile of papers, invites guests to punch its numbers to bring it alive.

Set as it is in this creamy-white New York City apartment, whose gallery-like walls are punctuated by large, abstract paintings, this tableau becomes a perfectly crafted, contemporary still life.

Then the door to the marble foyer opens, and Elaine Wynn, a tall, stunning blonde with blue-green eyes and sleek silver jewelry, enters. She's right on time. But, ever the consummate hostess, she apologizes for not being here to meet her early-arriving guest.

She settles into a burnt-orange dining chair, her face framed by the bright flowers of an enormous Ross Bleckner abstract.

Like the outfit she's wearing—a chic black-and-white plaid wraparound dress accented by a rhinestone-studded gray hoodie—Wynn's taste in art is eclectic. She has been collecting since the 1990s, when she and her then-husband, real estate developer Steve Wynn, decided they wanted to decorate Bellagio, one of their Las Vegas Strip casinos, and ended up creating one of the country's top collections.

"We amassed some amazing pieces, ranging from the Old Masters like Rembrandt to the Impressionism of Manet, Monet, and Renoir to the Post-Impressionists as well as contemporary art masterpieces," she says, adding that each of her three residences—her homes in Las Vegas and Los Angeles, and a Manhattan apartment—are well ap-

pointed with artwork. "I have an aesthetic appreciation for what I like. I don't suggest that my tastes are sophisticated or knowledgeable, but I know that if I see something that I think is of interest, on whatever level it appeals to me, that is what I want to own. The pedigree is not quite as important as the art itself, which is why I can be eclectic."

Wynn, director of Wynn Resorts, has long been a philanthropist and patron of art and the arts. As she transitions out of the company, she is turning all of her attention and much of her resources to this work.

She recently gave \$5 million, the largest gift by an individual, to establish the Elaine Wynn Studio for Arts Education at the Smith Center, a \$470 million performing arts and education center in downtown Las Vegas that will open in March 2012.

"We've never had in Las Vegas, except for our university theaters, appropriate places for Broadway musicals and truly legitimate touring companies like every other great American city," she says. "The entertainment of Las Vegas has always been bigger than life, with superstars like Céline Dion, Elton John, and Bette Midler. There's been tremendous excitement for this project. Some people have described the Smith Center as the most important civic thing since the building of the Hoover Dam. There's a lot of emotional investment in the project."

The Elaine Wynn Studio will include classrooms, conference rooms, and offices for education programs for staff, interns, and artists in residence.

"The arts are not meant to exist only for the select few," Wynn says. "The arts have to flourish throughout society to create happy people and fulfilled people. Las Vegas is primarily service oriented, and the majority of people who have moved there recently work in the hotels. Why

PROFILE
Elaine Wynn

wouldn't we want these families to have the ability to see shows and concerts?"

With the opening of the Smith Center, Wynn will have more time to focus on her other primary philanthropic interest: education. Her passion for this subject dates to the 1980s, when she and her then-husband established a scholarship that provided money to top high school students in Nevada and New Jersey who were long on brains but short on college funds.

"While we were funding this," she says, "I became aware of the other end of the spectrum, of the young people who were falling through the cracks, the at-risk kids who did not have equal educational opportunities. As a result, we changed our focus."

The Wynns zeroed in on nonprofit Communities In

Schools, providing a \$25 million endowment. Today, Wynn, as the national chairman of the organization, oversees a network of nearly 5,000 professionals and 57,000 volunteers working in 25 states and the District of Columbia who are transforming the lives of 1.3 million students with the greatest risk of dropping out of high school.

"This is the work I'm most proud of now," she says. "And it is the work that engages most of my time."

Communities In Schools, which has been giving students a helping hand for more than three decades, is the oldest and most successful organization in its field. "We're the fifth-largest youth agency in America," Wynn says, "yet we're one of the best-kept secrets in America."

In the next five years, Wynn aims to change that. A new branding campaign will help reach another 1.9 million

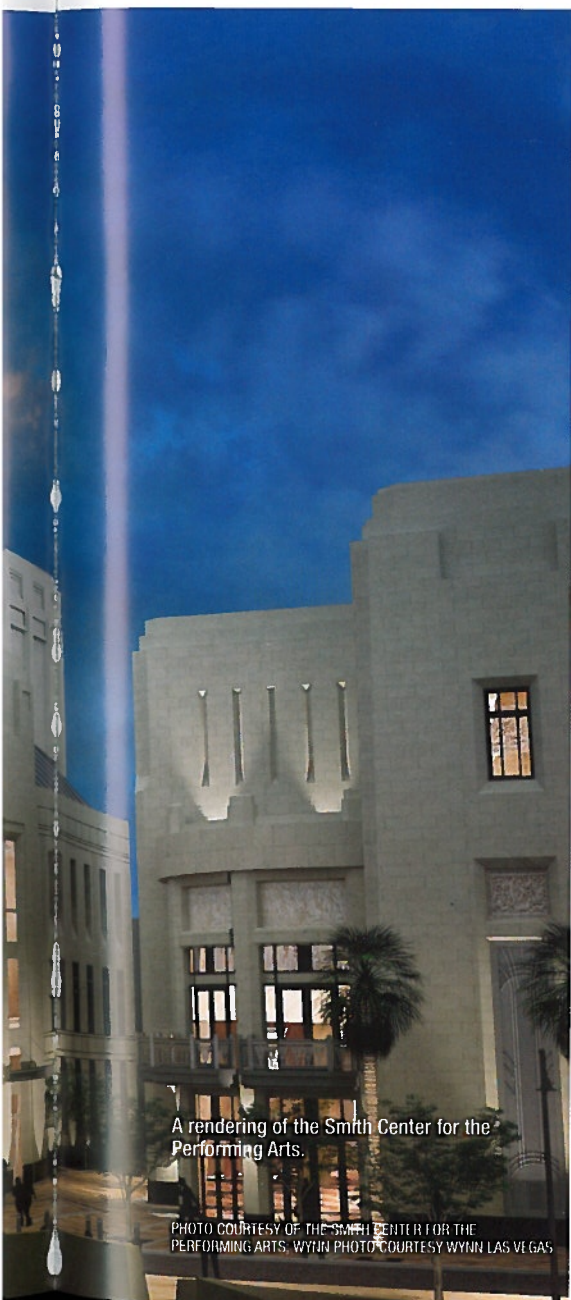


students, a crucial goal, Wynn says, because “every nine seconds, a student drops out of school and into an uncertain future. For about a third of U.S. students, the door to a bright future closes when they leave school without a diploma.”

As the demographics of the nation change and minorities become majorities, the dropout rate will take on added importance, she adds, “because the minorities are the most poorly educated and least successfully matriculated. If we don’t get these young people to be prepared and graduated from high school and ready to either work or move on to postsecondary institutions, it will be a dreadful prognosis for the future of the country.”

While other organizations focus on teacher training and curriculum issues, Communities In Schools shines the spotlight where it is needed most—on students who have unmet needs.

“We deal with the wraparound social services that children and families need to make them ready to learn,” Wynn says. “Kids can’t learn if they go to school hungry or don’t have glasses or shoes or have a toothache, so Communities In Schools creates a mechanism to address all those



A rendering of the Smith Center for the Performing Arts.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SMITH CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS. WYNN PHOTO COURTESY WYNN LAS VEGAS

basic needs so that when kids do go to school, teachers are free to teach them and don't have to worry about all the other stuff."

This big issue has a small cost: Less than \$200 annually per student.

One of the more thrilling parts of Wynn's work with Communities In Schools is seeing firsthand the difference the organization makes in the future of young people.

There are a million stories she could tell, she says, but one stands out. She's formed a special bond with a young woman named Talitha, a Hurricane Katrina survivor. After the 2005 disaster, Talitha and her mother were forced to leave their home in New Orleans and move to Houston, which has a strong Communities In Schools presence. Through the organization, Talitha got a summer job as a congressional page in Washington, D.C., and when Wynn was invited by First Lady Michelle Obama to attend a special Mother's Day event last year, she took Talitha.

"We were supposed to bring another woman who was important in our life," Wynn says. "My two daughters were busy taking care of their own children, so I asked Talitha. We spent the whole day together, and she told me that it was her dream to attend Howard University."

When it did come time for Talitha to go to college, Wynn was right there to help. Although she was offered a full scholarship to the University of Texas at Austin, Howard University put her on the waiting list. Wynn not only got her into Howard, but she also made a personal donation to cover a gap in Talitha's financial aid.

"And I'm still assisting her," Wynn says. "I told her, 'This is going to be hard because you're going to be in an environment that's more challenging than high school, and if you need help, you are supposed to reach out to me and Communities In Schools. And we're going to help you. We're here not only to help you graduate from high school, but also to help you succeed in life. Then you are going to pay it forward, and you are going to tell all the young people that if someone like you can make it, they can, too.'"

Wynn doesn't see her work with Communities In Schools and the Smith Center as charity. "I look at this as investments in the country," she says. "I refer to the country because I'm focused on America, not the world. For business people, venture philanthropy makes sense. Whether you're working purely on an educational level or generally in terms of enriching activities, that's a contribution to society, and a contribution to society is supposed to benefit all of us, it's supposed to uplift civilization. So for me, it's

an investment. The greatest thing that America has always had has been human resources, and we have to continue to invest in our human resources."

Wynn's involvement as an education advocate led to her recent co-chairing of a blue-ribbon panel in her home state of Nevada that sought, in partnership with the governor, much-needed educational reform.

"The legislators passed 13 out of our 16 measures," she says, beaming. "I think it's one of the most successful efforts in the country. We changed the structure of our state department of education, the selection process for the hiring of the state superintendent, and focused on many areas of educator accountability."

While Wynn intends to focus her time and money on education and the arts, that doesn't mean that she's limiting herself to any one organization or art form. This year, she became a trustee of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Also a member of the board of trustees of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, she recently chaired an event there marking the 50th anniversary of JFK's presidential inauguration.

"I view service as if we had a choice of a piece of a pie, and the pie represents all the needs that exist in making a perfect world," she says. "I can't solve health care, I can't solve poverty specifically, but I do care about education, and I have taken the time and trouble to become much more than a layperson on this subject. I have an elementary school in Las Vegas named after me. I know an awful lot about education and, as a result, that's a piece of the pie that's most suited to me temperamentally and intellectually. That's where I think the biggest thrust of my activity will be focused. But I don't want people to think of me so narrowly because I can get lost in the New York City Ballet and in the Cuban National School of Ballet and leave there and want to write a huge check to them, too. There are so many ways to be impactful."

Although Wynn played a key role in making the Las Vegas Strip what it is today, she doesn't want the reputation she earned permanently etched in fluorescent lights.

"I want my work in education and in the arts to be my legacy," the 69-year-old insists. "I have a new mantra: It's never too late to matter. If I live longer and I decide all of a sudden I like opera, for instance, I could make a difference there. I don't see that there are limitations on any of us, and I continue to be open." **LM**

For more information on Communities In Schools, visit cisnet.org.
 For more information on the Smith Center, visit thesmithcenter.com.