

CORPORATE
LADDER

Stephanie French

Other side of the coin

Arts supporter now raising funds as CEO of theater foundation; a smaller stage

BY MIRIAM KREININ SOUCCAR

DURING THE COURSE of Philip Morris' years as the biggest corporate arts sponsor, Stephanie French was an icon in the arts world.

As head of the company's global philanthropy program from 1981 until 2005, Ms. French made more than 1,000 grants a year, spending \$75 million annually to help cultural institutions of all sizes. She spent her nights and weekends at museums and theaters, personally observing every arts institution that the company, now known as Altria Group Inc., funded. And she made sure that a large portion of the money went to up-and-coming artists who were creating new work.

"Whereas the arts, she was snubbed by everyone," says Kimm Brucka Hopkins, president of the Brooklyn Academy of Music. "In the era of Stephanie's leadership at Philip Morris, they supported the most ar-

ting, most innovative and most forward-looking institutions and work."

Ms. French left Altria to spend time with her two children. She worked as a consultant for arts organizations and was an executive at U.S. Trust.

Smaller stage

BYT NOW, as director and chief executive of the Eyed Holzman Watermill Foundation, she's the one raising the money. The Brooklyn-based foundation operates Watermill Circus, the performance laboratory in Southampton, L.I., created by avant-garde theatrical director Robert Wilson. With a \$3 million annual budget, the stage is much smaller than Ms. French's platform at Philip Morris.

But her goal isn't much different from what it has been throughout her career: to help launch emerging artists. The Watermill Center, a six-acre complex founded in 1992, hosts 80 lucky performing artists from around the world each season to help Mr. Wilson develop his work, which includes award-winning productions of operas like *Madame Butterfly*. Last year, the center started a year-round program, offering residencies for young artists to develop their own work. Though the institution is well-known in the arts

PERSONNEL FILE

COMPANY Eyed Holzman Watermill Foundation

TITLE Director and chief executive

AGE 58

RÉSUMÉ 20 years as head of Philip Morris Cos. global philanthropy program; senior vice president of U.S. Trust

MANAGEMENT STYLE Teamwork

MOUNTAIN CLIMBED Kilmoryn

world—especially for its trouble-making girls, which attracts bold-faced names ranging from Emma Stone to Howard Stern—few outsiders have ever heard of it.

Ms. French wants to change that. She wants to build Watermill's brand by promoting performances developed there at venues in New York City. And she wants to help the resident artists launch their careers by giving out stipends and bringing their work to larger venues.

Further down the road, Ms. French plans to launch a \$1 million to \$1 million capital campaign to expand the center's grounds and build dorms to house all the artists.



Watermill also needs an endowment. Of course, in the midst of an economic crisis, there may be pipe dreams. "Whether we'll be able to raise the money we need to just keep it going right now keeps me up at night," Ms. French says.

Show of confidence

THAT'S WHY KILMORYN may have no shade she will pull it off. "Stephanie has the connections and the knowledge to create more opportunities for the institution," Ms. Hopkins says.

Ms. French, who has an M.B.A. from Harvard University, credits her passion for the arts with her upbringing. Her parents took her and her sisters into Manhattan from their Connecticut home nearly every weekend to visit museums. When Ms. French was 14, she saw the Jeffrey Butler perform. She loved it so much that she saved her money and bought a ticket for everyone in her family to go together.

"Even at that age, I was already promoting the arts," she says. ■