

Return to Sunnylands

First in an eight-part series

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In the latter part of the 20th century, the name Annenberg epitomized glittering parties, elegant Sunday brunches, and holiday fetes attended by the top echelon of the entertainment and political worlds. Limousines, often accompanied by Secret Service detail, snaked up the drive beyond the pink wall framing the Annenberg estate, known as Sunnylands.

Presidents from Eisenhower to Bush, royalty from Princess Grace to Queen Elizabeth, domestic and foreign dignitaries from Colin Powell to Margaret Thatcher visited Walter and Leonore Annenberg in Rancho Mirage. It perhaps should come as no surprise, given the fact that both Walter and Leonore at one time held the title of ambassador.

Such was their influence in business; philanthropy; and the promotion of education, the arts, communication, and peace that the couple established a foundation to ensure Sunnylands survived them (Walter died in 2002, Leonore in 2009).

The property, encompassing not only the residential grounds, but also a newly built visitors center, is scheduled to open to the public in November. Last month, in conjunction with the Palm Springs International Film Festival, the Annenberg Retreat at Sunnylands hosted its first private meeting for

a select group of filmmakers from around the world in the interest of encouraging socially relevant cinema.

“Retreats could take many forms,” says Geoffrey Cowan, president of The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands, “like a Camp David-type meeting where there’s a negotiation with the Americans, Palestinians, and Israelis to work out a peace agreement. Or it could be a group of scientists who get together to address an end to world hunger or problems with energy and water. Or it could be a meeting that leads to the creation of an institution like the United Nations or the International Monetary Fund.” The signature goal is straightforward: “To Lee and Walter, the informality of small groups of interesting people coming together would accomplish wonders,” says Diane Deshong, one of Leonore’s daughters.

MEETING OF THE MINDS

Long before Walter was Richard Nixon’s ambassador to Britain and Leonore held the ambassador-ranked title Chief of Protocol in Ronald Reagan’s administration, they were two young people from wealthy families who dealt with the same difficulties faced by the not so wealthy. Walter wanted to make his mother and seven sisters proud after his father, Moses, went to prison for tax evasion and died shortly thereafter.

“One of [Walter’s] sayings was, ‘Adversity tests us from time to time, and it is inevitable that this testing continues during life,’” recalls Michael Comerford, who served as the Annenbergs’ butler and house manager for 40 years.

Walter took the reins of Triangle Publications, his father’s debt-ridden company, and turned it into a communications giant. TV Guide and Seventeen were two of his most successful publications.

“In his time, he was one of the true innovators of the magazine world,” Cowan says. In *Legacy: A Biography of Moses and Walter Annenberg*, author Christopher Ogden writes, “Walter had built his business in part on the notion of ‘essentiality.’ Anyone interested in business had to take *The Wall Street Journal*; in horse racing, the *Daily Racing Form*; in television, *TV Guide*. They were the nation’s three essential publishing businesses, and Walter owned two of them.”

But by the mid-1980s, there were dozens of teen magazines and a proliferation of gambling casinos, which led to a tighter market for *Seventeen* and a decreased interest in horse racing. Annenberg sold much of Triangle to Rupert Murdoch in 1988 for a jaw-dropping \$3 billion, then the most expensive deal in publishing history, with the plan to devote the rest of his life to education and philanthropy, according to *The New York Times*.

Leonore Cohn was 7 when her mother died and her father couldn’t adequately care for her and her younger sister. In *Legacy*, Ogden quotes her as saying, “My father gave us away. Nobody knew what to do with us, and we had no place to go.” Their uncle, Harry Cohn (head of Columbia Pictures) sent the girls to boarding school. Later, they lived in the Cohn house, where Leonore learned from her Aunt Rose how to dress with style and entertain VIPs. These traits served her well as U.S. chief of protocol (“the first paying job I’ve ever had,” she told *The New York Times*); she held the post 11 months.

Both Walter and Leonore were divorced (he once, she twice) before they married each other in 1951 and moved to Walter’s home, Inwood, near Philadelphia, Pa. Leonore (known as Lee to her friends) “was a California girl ... born in New York but raised in Los Angeles,” Deshong says. “She loved being on the West Coast.” So the Annenbergs purchased nearly 197 acres of undeveloped desert in 1963 and began building Sunnylands. (In 1967 and 1968, they purchased an additional 727 acres.

Approximately 400 acres across the street from the walled estate were subsequently sold; in 1995 and 2001, they donated 4- and 2.5-acre parcels, respectively, to the Children's Discovery Museum of the Desert.)

"It was so large at the time that people in Rancho Mirage didn't want it here," says Gloria Greer, society editor for Palm Springs Life. "They were afraid it would look like a supermarket!" Opinions softened as the Annenbergs became gracious hosts during the winter. Desert residents coveted invitations to sway on the marble dance floor to the strains of big-name bands.

"They were absolute partners and had such incredible respect for each other," says Betty Barker, a Palm Desert resident and longtime friend of the couple, especially Leonore. "Most people knew Lee was beautiful and had money, but they didn't know how brilliant she was."

"Mom was a proud graduate of Stanford University at a time when there were very few women attending Stanford," Deshong notes.

According to Cowan, dean emeritus of the Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism at the University of Southern California, the Annenberg mission was "to be of service to all people."

"Most of all, the Annenbergs loved their country," says Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. She recalls Walter once stating, "My country has been good to me. I must be good to my country."

And Leonore, Jamieson continues, "loved the meetings that she hosted at Sunnylands at which [Supreme Court] Justices O'Connor, Breyer, and Kennedy provided her with guidance for her Sunnylands Trust project designed to teach high school students the Constitution."

A HOME OF LOVE

Having worked for Walter's predecessor in the U.S. ambassador's London residence, Comerford bore knowledge of high etiquette, fine wines, and formal service when, in 1969, he was offered the position of Sunnylands valet and personal assistant to Ambassador Annenberg.

"I organized the entire household, hiring and replacing staff as needed, arranging weekend dinner parties from family gatherings to big events, including eight New Year's Eve parties for President Ronald Reagan," he says.

Through the decades, Comerford came to understand and appreciate his employer's preferences. Food: an American hamburger or a New England boiled dinner, Irish stew, braised lamb shanks, and pasta. Cards: bridge or poker. Golf partners: "He enjoyed playing with Presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush, Secretary of State George Shultz, professional golfer Ray Floyd, Ambassador Charles Price, and [Texas businessman] Bobby French," Comerford reports.

The Annenbergs' generous philanthropic endeavors also made headlines. Some of Walter Annenberg's most important contributions were to education. He founded the journalism school at USC and the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1990, he donated \$50 million to the United Negro College Fund. And in 1993, he attended a White House ceremony at which President Clinton announced the ambassador's \$500 million matching-grant program that ultimately funded 2,400 public schools serving more than 1.5 million students. "The ambassador thought that if you didn't educate the grade school mind, then by high school, you'd lose them to gangs and drugs," Comerford says.

Barker met Leonore Annenberg in the early 1950s when the latter lived in Philadelphia and became friends with Barker's mother. "I was an only child, and my mother had a very empty nest after I moved to Chicago," Barker says. Then in the late 1970s, Barker ran into Leonore at the Christian Science Church in Palm Desert.

"Neither of us had any idea the other one was living here," Barker recalls. "From that time forward, we were in touch almost every day, best friends. Christian Scientists all over the world read the same lesson every week, and then we hear it on Sunday. Our habit was to discuss it after we had read it on Monday morning. Then we would sit down together and share what we'd each gotten out of it."

Although both Walter and Leonore were born into Jewish families, they didn't practice that faith, celebrating Easter and Christmas with family and friends. "Walter was very understanding, appreciative, and proud of our devotion to our religion," Barker says. "His sense of humor was always there, too. He called me Ma Barker. I don't think he ever called me Betty!"

Many friends noticed the special bond between the Annenbergs.

"I still smile when I think of Lee and Walter and their love for each other," says Evelyn Hall of Indian Wells. "Walter had a twinkle in his eye when he looked at Lee." Hall recalls when Walter was in a wheelchair at a party and Leonore took his hand and danced around his chair while the music played. On his 90th birthday, with 80 guests present, Walter Annenberg raised his glass and made this toast to his wife, according to Comerford: "The best thing I have done in my life is to marry you, Lee."

New Year's Eve parties at Sunnylands were legend among the lucky invitees. "The ladies were in beautiful gowns, and the gentlemen handsome in tuxedos and bow ties," Hall says. "Lee loved parties and was the ultimate hostess ... and enjoyed music. We met presidents, former presidents, governors, Supreme Court justices, first ladies, senators, and congressmen at the Annenbergs." Although Walter's public persona could be very formal and dignified, Comerford calls him "a superb conversationalist with dinner guests," and Barker says he was always the one to take her around and introduce her to others at Sunnylands parties.

The setting itself – vast private grounds with a golf course (nine holes with two sets of tees) and fishing lakes outside and a museum-worthy collection of art inside – created an unparalleled ambiance.

Palm Springs resident Jamie Kabler, the former husband of Leonore's youngest daughter, Elizabeth, says, "My wedding [at Sunnylands] was the most beautiful wedding I've ever attended, and I've been to White House weddings and weddings all over the world." Dr. John Harper, then rector of St. John's Episcopal Church directly across from the White House, performed the ceremony. "He asked me to tell Lee that a church is better set up to witness a ceremony, ... and I made the mistake of making that phone call. Lee said, 'Jamie, if [Sunnylands] was good enough for Barbara and Frank Sinatra [who also were married there], it's good enough for you.'" Kabler laughs. "I learned that Lee had the experience and knew what she was talking about. Even Brooke Astor said, 'To be invited to Sunnylands was the greatest invitation one could ever have.'"

"Lee was very precise," Kabler says. "If you were invited at 7 p.m. for a 7:45 dinner, at 7:43 you were walking down the hallway to the dining room."

According to Mary Perry, Sunnylands' marketing consultant, such precision carried over to meticulous

recordkeeping: “For every piece of art they bought, they kept the receipts and all of the background information. We know that our documentation is correct because it came from the artists.”

Kabler says that when Lee entertained, she thought of everyone involved, from the wait staff to the cook to the guest of honor. “Walter never cared about who people were, but what they were,” Barker says, referring to the ambassador’s consideration of character over title.

Cowan, too, talks about the Annenbergs’ thoughtfulness and the fact that Walter knew his father, Louis G. Cowan, former president of CBS. “Walter was a man of very few words, but one time I was at their house for brunch with my wife. He put his arm on mine and said, ‘Your father was a good man.’ It’s a wonderful, touching statement that’s still meaningful to me today.”

“They never raised their voices with each other,” Kabler declares. “Walter and Lee were truly a team.”

Deshong shares this about her mother and stepfather: “The marriage of Mom and Uncle Walter was a love match.”

MAKING A COMMITMENT

Drive along Bob Hope or Frank Sinatra Drives and the petal pink concrete block wall that marks two sides of Sunnylands’ perimeter lends an air of mystery to this grand estate, named after Moses Annenberg’s summer place in the Poconos, where, it is said, Walter liked to fish with his father. It’s possible that Sunnylands represented a familial bond to Walter, and it certainly became the stable home a young Leonore craved following her mother’s death. “One of her happiest days was when she and Uncle Walter began work on Sunnylands,” Deshong says. “When Sunnylands was finished [in 1966], Mom loved having all the children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren come visit.”

Pink oleanders originally provided privacy for the estate. The pink wall, one of the most-asked-about elements at Sunnylands, was a 1990s addition when the oleanders began to die from blight. Leonore asked that the wall match the pink tile roof of the house, and the quintessential California girl told friends the color reminded her of the desert sunrises and sunsets.

“What people don’t know is that they had the greatest greenhouses in the Coachella Valley,” Kabler says. “They were acres in size and were air conditioned fully in the summer and produced thousands of orchids. When you arrived at Sunnylands for the season, those orchids in the house had all been bred and raised on site. Lee sent people her own orchids as presents ... She loved cymbidium orchids in purple, white, and coral pink.”

When the gate to Sunnylands opens in November, there will be more to soak up than the sun and the family’s societal connections. Walter and Leonore’s valued causes — education, the arts and sciences, communications, fair political discourse, and world peace — will be center stage as the repurposed property conjures grand possibilities for now and for future generations.

Visitors will learn about the Annenberg history and legacy through a film in the visitors center theater and from kiosks in an exhibition space. They can participate in educational activities, sit on a bench outside and absorb the beauty of the surrounding gardens and mountain views, or enjoy a Zen experience walking in the gardens’ labyrinth. They also can pay a fee to ride electric trams that will ferry them across the golf course (which will remain private except for retreat guests) and past manmade fishing lakes to tour the refurbished Annenberg home. Throughout, they will be introduced to the couple’s passion for the arts, as evidenced by their acquisition of museum-quality paintings, sculptures, and other collectibles.

“There’s a concern because most of the family’s paintings are at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York that there are not significant pieces of art here. That’s just not true,” says Perry, referring to the billion-dollar donation of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist pieces bequeathed to the museum by Walter Annenberg in 1991. Sculptures by Auguste Rodin, Alberto Giacometti, and Jean (Hans) Arp, as well as silver gilt – all part of the Annenbergs’ personal collection – are just a sample of what will be on display at Sunnylands.

“Mom wanted Sunnylands to be public,” Deshong says. “She chose the architects [for the visitors center] and worked with the plans and budgets long before she died.”

According to Perry, Leonore insisted the center’s main space – with expansive views of the lawn, garden paths, and San Jacinto Mountains – resemble a living room.

“She wanted people to feel welcome here, like they were in her home. I like to say the biggest challenge will be getting people to leave, because it will be so comfortable,” Perry jokes.

“What’s exciting to me and the rest of the community is that Sunnylands isn’t just about what happened in the past. It’s about what’s going to happen here now and in the future.”