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Have Faith in Her

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU'RE A 94-YEAR-OLD OIL HEIRESS?
YOU GIVE AWAY AS MUCH OF YOUR FORTUNE AS POSSIBLE



Have Faith In Her

NINETY-FOUR-YEAR-OLD FAITH STRONG GIVES 75 PERCENT OF HER OIL FORTUNE TO WORTHY CAUSES, BUT THE MONARCH BAY RESIDENT HATES TALKING ABOUT IT. UNTIL NOW

Ninety-four-year-old Faith Strong lives alone, save for an assistant she reluctantly hired because of a heart condition. Her house is quite nice and comfortable but relatively modest compared to those of many of her Monarch Bay neighbors. Sure, the guarded, gated Dana Point community means Strong's property alone is worth millions. But unlike others around her who have torn down the original houses to erect McMansions, Strong has opted to keep her structure as it was when she bought it in the 1970s . . . for \$10,000.

She did recently improve the back yard, which boasts a magnificent view of the Pacific Ocean and, on a clear coastal day like a recent Friday, Santa Catalina Island. It was only recently that her longtime landscaper turned a sloping hill into a tiered garden. A giant iron butterfly is not plopped among the lush plants just for looks; it signals the reason for the garden's existence.

Strong read about the plight of Monarch

butterflies, which have experienced a tenfold population drop over the past decade and have been projected to go quasi-extinct over the next 20 years. So she had her back yard filled with plants that attract Monarchs—and didn't stop there. She also saw to it that similar gardens and rows of Monarch butterfly-attracting milkweed were planted at New Directions for Women, an internationally recognized drug-and-alcohol rehab and detox-treatment provider for females, whose sprawling campus in eastern Costa Mesa includes a large two-story main building, two adjacent cottages and two other Willo Lane sober-living houses.

While showing off the new vegetation, New Directions CEO Rebecca Flood mentions that among the contributions Texas oil heiress Strong has lavished the program with over the years was \$800,000 toward the more than \$2 million it took to totally rebuild the main building, which has resident beds on the second story.

"She has been a donor here for all 40 years of our existence," Flood says of Strong, who has been in recovery herself for more than half a century. "She was a signer of our incorporation papers [in 1977], and she has donated millions of dollars to our organization throughout our lifetime."

Also a very generous supporter of Greenpeace, Strong directed specific funding to help save Monarch butterflies. That illustrates how Strong doesn't simply cut checks to nonprofits but becomes involved in how her money is spent, whether it be for the worldwide Hunger Project, the Natural Resources Defense Council or A Place Called Home, the South Los Angeles nonprofit that aims to keep kids ages 6 to 21 out of gangs and in school.

Despite estimating that she gives away 75 percent of her wealth—yet remains very, very wealthy—you don't see Strong gracing Orange County society pages. That's because she has preferred to remain mostly anonymous about her philanthropy. Until now.

BY MATT COKER

Relaxing in a living-room chair, Strong is of good humor, relatively good health and remarkably good memory as she sits for a rare interview. She is wearing a matching brown outfit, a long necklace adorned with little fish and animal figures, and, in her white hair, imitation green and white flowers. The only thing that gives away her age is the walker next to her.

Having asked what her inquisitor came to talk about, Strong gives a look of disappointment when she is told it is her. She says she has written down some notes on topics she would prefer to cover before

taking any personal questions. Who would refuse such a nice lady?

Strong first explains that she always believed anonymity was best when it came to her own philanthropy. She had been hurt, even resentful when people came out of the woodwork to ask her for help when news got out she was rich. "One day, I woke up and said, 'Faith, if you needed money, wouldn't you go to someone with money and ask for help?'" she says. "I was hiding. I didn't want others to know how much money I had; I didn't want people coming back to ask for more. Then I thought, 'What the

hell?' I didn't want to keep secrets."

Among those who were not in on her secrets were her own six children, who didn't learn how wealthy their mom was until Strong sat them down to tell them in the early 1960s. Most were already grown, out of the house and spoused up by then. (Her oldest son, Barry, is now 72.) "It was a most wonderful thing," Strong says of her admission. "It's given a sense of freedom. When I die, there will be no guesswork. I wish all parents would do that because it is on kids' minds."

They better bring a calculator to figure out how much money Mom is leaving.

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NEW DIRECTIONS FOR WOMEN



RILEY KERN

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You can track the formation of Strong's wealth in the book *Oil, Taxes, and Cats: A History of the DeVitt Family and the Mallet Ranch* by David J. Murrah (Texas Tech University Press, 2001).

J.H. Johnson came to Texas from Illinois in 1836, the year of Texan independence, and went on to become a man of influence in Washington County in the eastern-central part of the Lone Star State. William Denver Johnson, the seventh of J.H. Johnson's 11 children, was born on Oct. 10, 1860, on his father's Washington County farm near Brenham. In 1876, when he was only 17, "W.D." left home to work as a farmhand in Brown County, which is in the western-central part of Texas. Longing to become a merchant, he took a job in a Brownwood store where he'd previously bought farm supplies.

He later relocated to the booming West Texas town of Sweetwater, working in the general store for four years before using \$1,000 he had saved to acquire his own store. He and a partner went on to buy a mercantile store in the far West Texas town of Pecos, where W.D. also joined the cattle business of his brothers Jesse Leon "J. Lee" Johnson and Fanning Woodyard "Woody" Johnson, who would one day be known as "the whitest rich man on Earth."

W.D. Johnson was put in charge of financial management. In 1891, he sold his store and, along with Woody, opened Pecos Valley State Bank, which was primarily a cattle-loan operation. He married a Houston woman, and they began a family, which would include four girls and a boy, in a large Pecos home. However, W.D., who was uneducated, wanted his children to receive better schooling and for himself to be closer to financial markets. So he moved his family to Kansas City. That is where his granddaughter, Faith, would be born in 1922. By then, W.D. went by "Big Pop" because another granddaughter could not pronounce "grandfather."

Despite the Missouri relocation, "Big Pop"—who never smoked, drank or

gambled, according to Strong—continued to buy land with his brothers and other partners, including the Mallet Ranch with David DeVitt. Strong can remember being driven out into the middle of a flat Texas vista, looking for miles and miles in every direction and not being able to see with the naked eye the point at which the family's land ended. At last count, it was tabulated that the Johnson brothers' 60-plus surviving family members, who now compose a trust, own 1 million acres of land, much of it with oil and natural gas below.

Strong, who is W.D. Johnson's oldest living relative, just heard from family-trust overseer John Archer that the Shell Oil Co. just discovered a new oil field on the trust's land.

Growing up, Strong was a free spirit. She started writing poems and composing songs on the piano in her 20s. She also paints and has written eight books—*Glories of Aging* is her latest—most of which include her poetry. During the interview, she paused to read three poems, including one she did not pen, Emma Lazarus' "The New Colossus" of Statue of Liberty fame. ("Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free . . .") The reading punctuated a point Strong made about the true goodness and welcoming nature of Americans, current political events notwithstanding.

Strong's uniqueness in her own family may best be explained if you know she came from a staunchly Republican family but has been a Democrat since Franklin Delano Roosevelt's presidency. She laughs at the memory of what happened when FDR's successor, Harry Truman, asked W.D. Johnson to ride in a car with him to William Jewell College in Liberty, Missouri, where the president was giving the commencement address. "Big Pop turned red and purple and said, 'Absolutely not; don't insult me!'" Strong recalls.

By the time Strong reached her 30s, life was a party—and she was the life of every party. "I drank like normal people until I did not," she says. "I'd have a couple of drinks before cocktail parties because I hated a lot of the people who

would go to them. I had huge flower bills because I had to send out so many apologies. I'd jump into swimming pools, flirt with husbands."

While she could go weeks, even months without drinking, when she did imbibe, she would do it with gusto, too often going on weeklong benders. At 42, the same age Strong was when she had her last child, she got help from Alcoholics Anonymous. She has not had a drink since.

"Today, I tell people you have to be 94 to have 52 years of sobriety," she says with a laugh.

One of Strong's four marriages—"We don't have to get into that"—brought her to La Jolla, where in the 1960s she created Pills Anonymous, the first 12-step program for addiction to prescription medication. She recalls the flack she got from Alcoholics Anonymous types for that.

In 1983, Strong got a vision to bring AA to the USSR, a dream that took her nearly three years to realize because the U.S. and the Soviet Union were still waging the Cold War. She still shakes her head in amazement: "I was just one person and had never been in the workaday world."

After Strong's project, Creating a Sober World, finally received Soviet-government approval, she received an anonymous phone call from someone asking, "Why are you going over there to help the enemy?"

"I let that all blow over me because I had made this commitment," says Strong, who joined other former addicts-turned-certified drug counselors in first going to Moscow in June 1986, and then spreading out throughout the Communist country. By then, Mikhail Gorbachev was referring to alcoholism as a "green snake" choking his country, she recalls.

AA and Al-Anon (for family members of addicts) now flourish in Russia, where Strong is considered the founder of the programs. She could not attend the 20th-anniversary celebration of that trip in 2006, but she made a video that was played to some of the 3,000 people now in recovery in Moscow. "I'll never forget the first meeting," says Strong, her voice breaking at the memory, "when Russian alcoholics got up and told their stories for the first time. They just lit up. The way they handled [alcoholism] before was they threw you in jail. It shows what one person can do with a commitment."

Strong was among those who helped Pamela Wilder and the Junior League of Orange County start New Directions for Women in 1977. Wilder had stood up at the Junior League meeting, identified herself as a recovering addict and asked for assistance in establishing a recovery program for women. "Pam would come for money, and I always said it had to be anonymous," Strong says. "It would drive her crazy that I would not let her use my name. One day, she said, 'Faith, I came up with something. I have a house, and we'll call it Faith.'"

Strong mimics the disappointed look



FLOOD CALLS STRONG HER MENTOR

RILEY KERN

she shot at Wilder, who volleyed back with, "Faith means more than your name."

Wilder and her husband sold Strong the Monarch Bay home she still resides in when the couple moved out of the area. Flood met Strong when she left New Jersey's Seabrook House, where she had directed treatment services for 26 years, to lead New Directions about 12.5 years ago.

"The first week I was here, I looked at who the donors were and started kind of putting the history together," Flood recalls. "There were files about Faith taking AA to the Soviet Union. So, in my first weeks, we had breakfast at Hotel Laguna. We both still remember this; we were kindred spirits. I just learned from her; she mentored me. I was taking on a huge challenge here, and it was frightening and overwhelming. She just kind of stayed by my side. She stepped out in faith... which is her name. She provided great strength."

Though Strong preferred to keep her philanthropy secret, Flood still managed to honor her during the Circle of Life Breakfast, New Direction's largest annual fundraiser, at Big Canyon Country Club in Newport Beach on March 28, 2011. "She is not someone who gets honored in big ways," Flood says of Strong. "It's not like she goes to big charity events. You do not see her at the Segerstrom Center or hospital galas or all those things people are intrigued with and get in the limelight at. She goes where there is poverty, need and desperation, where people are hurting."

Strong recalls going with some friends to a fundraiser at an Irvine mansion several years ago. She walked into a large room with chandeliers, tiled floors with expensive rugs—and about 15 luxury cars. When she found out she was not in the living room but the garage and thinking of the many people in Orange County doing without when one person owned so many autos for his own amusement, she bolted for the "luxury restroom."

"I vomited," she says, "but I ended up getting the guy to donate one of his cars."

Flood believes Strong chooses to flirt with the public with her writing and painting. The New Directions CEO has hung Strong's painting, *A View From the*

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Have Faith In Her

» FROM PAGE 11

Lake at Tahoe, on the facility's dining-room wall. Under it is the inscription "A place that made this home possible," which references Strong having sold her family home in Lake Tahoe and given the proceeds to New Directions.

On the fence next to the main Monarch butterfly garden at New Directions is a placard with Strong's photo; it includes the words "We would not be who we are without you."

"She empowers you to be more than you think you can be," Flood says. "She empowers people to give more than they think they can, to create bigger things than they are creating. She has high expectations of people, high expectations of people in her world. She wants them to be smart, thoughtful and generous of spirit."

For giving the most money an individual can under the law to a presidential campaign, Strong was among those who received a personal thank-you email from Hillary Clinton. Strong has also given tens of thousands of dollars over the years to Obama for America, DNC Services Corp., the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee and Emily's List, the super PAC that lobbies for women's issues.

Which brings us to a painful subject: the recent presidential election. Strong

gasps at the mere mention of it.

"Well, I will tell you something funny," she begins. "I remember Bill Clinton was impeached for a blowjob, and he lied and said it was because he did not think a blowjob was having sex. That means Trump can be impeached if he pulls this country down. And he's changing a little bit. He just had Al Gore talk with him, and it was supposedly productive. I'm sure Al Gore would say so if it wasn't."

Strong notes that in Hillary Clinton's email, she emphasized that "Donald Trump is our next president, so we must support him and try to help him."

"She's a classy lady, a really classy lady," Strong says of Clinton.

Talk in the room then turns to when Clinton will speak up again about the country's direction, how Barack Obama appears quite ready to leave the White House and Trump surrounding himself with generals as advisers after he said he knows more than generals.

The election "was, for us, a big upset, but it started a conversation," Strong says. "We should abolish the electoral vote. After I made that commitment, someone told me that Lady Gaga already has 4 million supporting that. Barbara Boxer mentioned it, so the conversation has already started. We have to keep it going. More people would vote" if the Electoral College was abolished.

"Remember, it is called 'We the people.' We have to get our voices heard," she continues. "And one person can make a difference."



RILEY KERN

Flood confesses that Strong has slowed down, but "she is still very politically active and more worldly than her immediate community."

"We all could learn something from Strong, Flood says.

"If our government paid attention to how she uses her resources," she says, "our government would be in better stead than it is. She takes that which she believes in, spreads the word, decides 'here is something I can do,' and she teaches others how to take care of their world. I say all the time that I don't think people get the magnitude that Faith Strong is her birth name."

"Contributing" and "donating" are not synonymous in Strong's view. Anyone can fire off a check for a donation. "She doesn't donate," Flood says. "She invests. She becomes a partner."

"I know I am blessed to be able to give, but everyone can," Strong mentions during our interview. "I give away 75 percent of my

income now, but I still have a good income. Everyone should start giving 10 percent, like the Bible says. It's like they say: When you give, it comes back double, although that should not be the reason for giving."

Having successfully spread that message to her family members, Strong can now brag about having a daughter and grandson who, despite their wealth, buy their clothes at thrift stores. When she told her daughter it was okay to shop at Macy's, Strong was told, "I don't like to do it that way, Mom. I don't feel good about it."

"Some of us are teachers, and I believe all of us came here to learn," says Strong, who sees different stages of life, from birth to near death, as representing unique journeys.

"I'm on my last journey, and I still learn something every day," she says before drawing yet more laughter with, "I think that's why I'm still around, I still have a lot to learn."

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