

## *A legacy of giving*

By Gayle Guynup

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SARASOTA — For **Betty** Schoenbaum, who turns 100 on Wednesday, a life welllived can best be measured by the number of lives one has changed in a positive way.

It would be hard to come up with a number for **Betty**, because over the course of a generous lifetime she has touched more lives than we can possibly count. Whether it is through the thousands of scholarships she has given, the work of the Glasser-Schoenbaum Human Services Center or that of the Salvation Army, there is no doubt about the tremendous impact that Alex and **Betty** Schoenbaum have had on countless lives.

**Betty** Frank was born in Dayton, Ohio, to Sarah and Sam Frank, the second of four

children, on Sept. 27, 1917. Good genes run in this family: one of **Betty**'s brothers is 95, and her other brother and sister both passed away in their 90s.

In 1917, just to set the scene, automobiles were beginning to roll off the assembly lines, Boeing flew its first aircraft, the average price of a new home was \$5,000 and

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**Betty Schoenbaum at the Glasser-Schoenbaum Center.** [HERALD-TRIBUNE STAFF PHOTO / DAN WAGNER]



**Betty and Alex Schoenbaum in their youth, before they were married, date unknown.** [COURTESY PHOTO]

## **LEGACY**

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the average wage was 22 cents per hour. There were no computers, very few dishwashers or washers and dryers, and electricity was not commonly available.

The world looked very different from today.

“When you think about it, more happened in those 100 years than in any other 100 years in the history of the world,” Schoenbaum says. “The industrialization of the world, the computer age, even landing on the moon ... It was just amazing.”

Parkette, later renamed Shoney's — and the rest is history. More than 2,000 restaurants in 36 states. Alex paid \$2,500 for the building and \$7,500 for the equipment. A \$10,000 investment started that whole chain of restaurants,” **Betty** Schoenbaum says.

While Alex Schoenbaum was building the Shoney's chain, the couple was also raising their four children: Raymond, Jeffrey, Joann and Emily.

“I got married at 22, and had my first child, Raymond, at age 28, as soon as the war was over. Fourteen months later, I had another son, Jeffrey, who is now 70. I knew I wanted three children. I tried until I was 38, and had my first

seven out of the 10. She asked for a little more time, which he gave her. And this time when she came back, she had the 10 organizations. Alex went to Northern Trust and they gave us nearly half a million dollars at a very low interest rate. Two years after it was built, the bank loan was paid off.”

**Betty** Schoenbaum has been very active with the center since her husband passed away, and is a lifetime member of the center's board of directors.

There is so much more, including the Schoenbaum Family Enrichment Center in Charleston, West Virginia; the Schoenbaum Family Foundation; the Alex and **Betty** Schoenbaum Science, Education, Cultural and

Schoenbaum says she was blessed with parents who lived for their children first. “It was the most important thing in my life, knowing that I counted and that they cared.”

Above all else, young **Betty** loved dancing. “I started dancing ballet when I was 3 years old, but I wasn’t allowed to study tap until I was 8. I studied for 15 years, until I was 18. I was in all the school productions all the way through high school,” she says. While debating was fun, her goal was to be a dancer. “When I got to high school I got taller, up to 5 foot, 8 ½ inches. I was tall enough to be the center on the girls’ basketball team, but was too tall to be a dancer in a chorus line, and that was my real ambition in those days.

“There were no Rockettes back then,” she says. But Broadway’s Roxy Theater had the Roxyettes. Unfortunately the girls were all 5 foot 4 inches to 5 foot 6 inches tall. Now, I have shrunk 4 inches. Today, I’m 5 feet 4 ½ inches tall, and they don’t want me anymore. Today they are looking for taller girls!”

**Betty’s** life took a new course when she decided to attend Ohio State University.

While she never did get her degree there, “I did get my Mrs. there. I became Mrs. Alex Schoenbaum.”

### Just the beginning

**Betty** met Alex Schoenbaum on her first day of school.

She was on her way to the Phi Sigma Delta house for a pledge party. She got to the mezzanine in the lobby and looked down at the 1,000 or so people and realized she didn’t know a single soul.

“I saw a man standing on the mezzanine. He was a big, handsome fellow and he looked like he knew what was going on. I went over to him and asked him if he could show me the way to the fraternity party. That was just the beginning.

“By the time of homecoming of my junior year, he had given me a fraternity ring. In the spring, he gave me a black onyx ring, which, back then, just coming out of the Great Depression, was what men did when they couldn’t afford a diamond. We were engaged,” she says.

After they were married, and Alex Schoenbaum was making a name for himself in the insurance industry, the advent of World War II changed everything — for a while. His oldest brother, Raymond, had run the family’s three bowling alleys for their father. When Raymond died in the war and the brothers’ father became ill, Alex Schoenbaum gave up the insurance business (even though they had asked him to become a partner) and moved to Charleston, West Virginia, to take over the family business.

“On the corner across from the bowling alley was an empty lot and Alex Schoenbaum put a

daughter, Joann, at the age of 39.” Their last child, Emily, was born when **Betty** was 49.

In all, today, **Betty** Schoenbaum is a proud grandmother of seven and great-grandmother of 11.

Alex Schoenbaum, the love of **Betty’s** life, passed away in 1996. “Alex smoked from the age of 14 until the age of 81, and that is what got him,” she says. “We were married 56 wonderful years.”

### Philanthropic debut

Schoenbaum moved into her downtown penthouse shortly after her husband passed away, and became involved in the philanthropy for which she is so well-known.

“I was not a businesswoman,” she says, “I had no real business experience. Anytime I wanted to give money away, though, Alex never objected to what I gave, which I deeply appreciated. But it was always Alex who gave the big money or else he would raise it for them.”

For example, there was the \$31 million for the Salvation Army.

“That money was to set up a pension plan for the people working at Salvation Army,” Schoenbaum explains. “People working there had to pay for their uniform, car, house and food. After they took that out of their salary, there wasn’t much left. When they retired, most couldn’t even buy a house. So Alex went to Atlanta and asked the heads of the organization how they could allow the people who worked so hard for them to live that way. They told him they could raise money to help people, but could not raise money for salaries. Alex told them, ‘Give me five years and one man to help me — because I still have a business to run — and I’ll get you the money.’ He raised \$25 million for the pension and \$6 million extra,” **Betty** says.

“When people would ask him why a nice Jewish boy was doing this for a Christian organization, Alex would tell them, ‘We are all descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We are all brothers. When my brother is in need, no matter his religion, race or creed, the Salvation Army is there to help.’” Then there was the Glasser- Schoenbaum Human Services Center.

Kay Glasser had this idea that she wanted to create a mall of human service organizations. She was in her 70s at the time. She needed money and didn’t know where to go, so she went to see Alex Schoenbaum. One day, Kay timidly went into his office and told Alex Schoenbaum her dream.

“Kay told him she had the land from the city for \$1 a year for 99 years, but there was no money to build the buildings. Well, Alex wasn’t convinced,” **Betty** Schoenbaum remembers. “He gave Kay three months to come back with 10 organizations that would

Sports Campus in Kiryat Yam, Israel; and many local charities, including the Jewish Family and Children’s Services and the Women’s Resource Center.

### Special joy

But there is another part of her philanthropy that brings **Betty** Schoenbaum a special joy, and that is the thousands of scholarships that she has made available to a variety of schools, including Ohio State, West Virginia, Johnson & Wales, the University of Charleston (West Virginia) and others.

The results of these scholarships — the stories of the lives that have been touched — can be found on shelves in her home office that are filled with countless binders and scrapbooks jam-packed with thank-you letters and photographs from the beneficiaries of her generosity.

“It is such a wonderful feeling to help all of these deserving people,” she says. “I tell people all the time that I am just going to burst with joy one day.”

She also encourages other people to give. “I tell them there are no luggage racks on the hearse. You can’t take it with you. Don’t wait until you die to give. Give when you live. That way, you have the joy of seeing what you have accomplished with your money.

**Betty** Schoenbaum’s well-known motto is “the joy of giving is the joy of living.” At 100, she is still busy living up to that. Don’t be surprised if you see her supporting many of the big fundraising events in the upcoming social season, something that still brings her great joy. And, if you are very lucky, you may even be the recipient of one of her famous “heart-to-heart” hugs, embraces that doctors once told her have an undeniable healing quality.

“God allowing me to live this long — what a gift. What a gift. I am so fortunate. I have had such a beautiful life. It has been joy beyond description.”



**Betty and Alex Schoenbaum, date unknown.**  
[COURTESY PHOTO]

drivein restaurant there — the

want to be part of the center. In three months, Kay had



**Betty Schoenbaum hugs her “significant other,” a sculpture by Jack Dowd, in her penthouse home in Sarasota. Schoenbaum says her sense of humor has contributed to her longevity. [HERALD-TRIBUNE STAFF PHOTO / DAN WAGNER]**

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