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## **MOLLY FOREMAN:** This PR dynamo keeps going strong



DAMON HIGGINS/THE PALM BEACH POST

Molly Foreman inside her home in Boca Raton with her dog Gigi, an Imperial Shih Tzu. After retiring in 1992, she started volunteering full time for the Boca Raton Symphonia.

# Just because a person is 80 doesn't mean they have to fold up their tent.'

By Leslie Gray Streeter  
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**M**olly Foreman is good at so much—a pithy turn of phrase, generating creative ideas, and carving a successful niche in the advertising and marketing business of the *Mad Men*-era 1960s, when a woman was more often seen taking a coffee order than taking a meeting. The only thing she doesn't seem to be good at is retiring. "I'm not the retiring type," winks Foreman, relaxing for a rare moment in her Boca Raton living room, her Imperial Shih Tzu Gigi reclining near her feet. When the fastidiously put-together and youthful "80-plus" Foreman moved to Palm Beach County in 1980, she'd closed her boutique marketing company in Chicago, thinking she'd relax in the Florida sunshine. But a year later, she'd reopened in Boca Raton with her daughter. Later, she jumped onto several cultural boards in the area, including the Kravis Center, the Palm Beach Symphony and currently the Boca Raton Symphonia, where she serves as the marketing vice president. She may be a volunteer, but she's always working. Turns out that in her 80s, lounging in the sun wasn't her

thing after all. "Just because a person is 80 or 85 doesn't mean they have to fold up their tent," she says. "You don't just have to play bridge or golf. You should keep a sense of worth." Symphonia board president Steve Pomeranz is thrilled to have her on board. "Her tremendous amount of creativity matches with her life experiences, and you get a powerhouse, and someone who's always looking towards the future, who always has a positive view, and then has the actual skills to back it up." Although Foreman isn't a big *Mad Men* follower, her life has some interesting parallels with the A&E drama's Peggy Olson (Elizabeth Moss). Both started their ad careers as secretaries with a big creative idea and a bigger drive, both had families which didn't immediately understand veering away from the traditional stay-at-home wife and mother trajectory, and both faced co-workers who had to adjust their attitudes. So her story isn't really a TV show, but the details of it could make an amazing movie. A Detroit native, Foreman decided to study business at the University of Michigan, instead of becoming a history teacher like she had planned. Her brother had gone to World War II, "and I thought 'Who will run the family business if he doesn't

come back?'" she remembers. (Sadly, he perished in the South Pacific, and she did, indeed, wind up helping her father with his air conditioning business for a time.) At Michigan, where she worked as the business manager for the campus newspaper, she says that female students were expected "in those days to get their Mrs. degree," meaning they were in college to find a husband. After graduating as only one of three women in her class at business school, Foreman started working as a secretary in a small ad firm and eventually became an account executive at another for \$25 a week. While she enjoyed her work, creating campaigns for department stores, some of her co-workers didn't understand working with her. "The man who gave us our checks would say, 'Why are you taking money away from a man who has a household?' every time he gave me a check," she remembers. "Then when I was pregnant, they told me I'd have to leave when I showed, so I left at six months." It's the kind of thing that makes you want to go back in a time machine and sue. Foreman says it's the way it was. But five years later, "one of my clients asked me to come back."

Foreman continued on 4D

# Volunteer devoted to arts

## Foreman

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Foreman's secrets for dealing with this are not from the feminist handbook, but they worked for her: "You couldn't tell a man what they should do. You had to ask questions, and point them towards a solution they should follow," she explains.

And she wound up marrying her college sweetheart from Michigan, Bernard Kozel, who died in 2005.

"My late husband was a businessman, and he appreciated having a wife that he could tell about his day, who would understand. People would say 'You think like a man,' and I knew they meant it as a compliment."

By the time she'd opened her own shop in 1961 on Chicago's busy Michigan Avenue, specializing mostly in the clothing and retail industry, Foreman decided to only hire women. "They were very good employ-

ees," she says. "I wanted to give them an opportunity. A lot of them were married with kids."

She worked in Chicago until 1975, then in Cincinnati until 1980, when she moved to Florida. When she moved, her daughter, Amy Birkenes (now the proprietor of Lighthouse Point pet hotel Chateau Poochie) asked her to set up shop with them, "and reluctantly I said OK, so we opened Birkenes Foreman."

In 1982, she started Foreman and Associates, which ran until 1992. She started working with a group to help the Palm Beach Symphony off the ground, and then worked with the then-fledgling Kravis Center. Now that she's working for free, she's free to work for what she loves, which is keeping the arts alive in South Florida.

"In my opinion, where there's no arts, there's no civilization. We're reaching out to the community, to kids, and families. These kids have grown up with cellphones in one hand, and a game controller in the other," she says. "And we want to appeal to them. We've had events where we've had close to 600 people on a Sunday, so there is an interest."

Foreman's enthusiasm

has impressed the people she works with, not in a "Isn't she great for her age" way, but in a "Holy cow!" way.

"Her memory is incredible," Pomeranz said. "You and I can't remember what we had for breakfast two days ago, and she's can remember phone numbers and very specific things. She's got a mind like a steel trap. She's been a great support to me as president."

"Here's a prime example. She just called me and said 'How does \$1 a day to support culture in your community sound?' and I said 'What are you talking about?'" Pomeranz says. "She said 'It's not part of the tax base in Boca Raton to support culture, so what if we went out there and ask for \$1 a day, which is \$30 a month, and if 50,000 people donate that, we could support culture for a year, from the Symphonia to the museum. You can do an awful lot on a dollar a day.' This is how she thinks."

Foreman jokes about not retiring, but says that in the end, she's fine with it.

"In my waning years, my brain's still functioning. It's exciting to see ideas still taking hold."

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