Dance Devotee Stays in Motion

By ROBIN POGREBIN

GIVEN that she is 77 years old and has been on the board of the Alvin Alley American Dance Theater for 17 years, it is no surprise that Joan H. Weiss clearly does not need to serve any longer. She could simply be enjoying time with her husband, Sanford J. Weiss, who recently retired as the head of a Citigroup. They could be relaxing at their home in California, wine country or spending more time with their four grandchildren.

But Ms. Weiss still has goals to accomplish, including providing housing for Alvin Alley students, given how hard it is for dancers to afford to live in New York. And she is eager to see what Alvin Alley’s new artistic director, Robert Battle, who succeeded Judith Jamison in June, will bring as he begins his first season this month.

In town, the dance company cannot imagine Alvin Alley without Ms. Weiss. “When Joao does something, it’s with every fiber of her being,” said Shae Orpen, the executive director of the Alvin Alley Dance Foundation, and the company’s umbrella organization. “So if the right would feel like we’d lose our balance. She’s that connected. She’s that integral to what we do.”

Ms. Weiss has been crucial to keeping the organization stable financially throughout her tenure, despite challenging economic times. She has contributed large sums of her own money and raised large sums from her friends. She donated $55 million to Weill Cornell Medical College, $4 million: new home on West 54th Street at Ninth Avenue, called the Joan Weill Center for Dance, which opened in 2009 and is thought to be the largest dance complex in New York City.

She has turned Alvin Alley’s annual gala from a relatively modest affair into a springer celebration at the New York’s Grand Ballroom, where people dance until the wee hours. Last year it raised $7 million while honoring Ms. Weiss for her decade of service as chairwoman.

In the three years after Ms. Weiss became a co-chairwoman of the gala in 1996, the event tripled in size and revenue. This season’s gala, on Oct. 30, features Michelle Obama and the model Iman as honorary chairwomen.

Ms. Weiss has gone around the world with the dance company, helping to organize tours to Beijing, Shanghai and St. Petersburg, Russia. She has also made many visits to Alvin Alley camps for disadvantaged preadolescents. She and her husband were the lead supporters of Alvin Alley’s 2008 endowment campaign—which raised $50 million as part of the 90th anniversary celebration—and received the Carnegie Medal of Philanthropy Award in 2009.

And she has become friends with the people who work at Alvin Alley, entertaining the dancers in her home, making sure she knows everyone by name. “She is Joan’s greatest confidante,” said Ms. Jamison, now chairwoman emeritus.

Ms. Weiss has grown evangelical about Alvin Alley. She gives tickets to her hairdressers and housekeepers as holiday presents. She invites friends to performances and persuades them to buy tickets at the Alvin Alley gala.

A lot of people, including my husband, had no idea what this was about, so you have to take a lot of time to explain it to them,” she wrote. “A lot of my friends, frankly, I literally dragged here, especially the guys. And now they all come back.”

Ms. Weiss was first exposed to Alvin Alley as a teenager, when her family moved from California to New York City and lived at the Wellington Hotel near City Center on West 55th Street, where the company has long performed.

Years later, friends invited Ms. Weiss and her husband—the longtime chairmen of Carnegie Hall—to see Alvin Alley in Harlem. Ms. Weiss was smitten with the dancers and with Ms. Jamison. “She was such a role model and such a presence,” she said.

Before joining Alvin Alley’s board, Ms. Weiss served on the board of Women in Need, a charity for homeless women and their families. “My husband used to kid me that he took care of culture and I took care of the streets,” she said. “I realized that Alvin Alley brought them together.”

Ms. Weiss always says the dance comes from the people, and therefore it should be brought back to the people. Ms. Weiss joined the board in 1994 and became chairwoman six years later. She and her husband have become Alvin Alley’s biggest financial supporters, though Ms. Weiss declined to be specific about their total contributions.

“Even a lot of the board of directors,” she said. “They need to grow.”

For now, Ms. Weiss said she continues to enjoy being part of what she calls the Alvin Alley family. “You get to know the dancers and you see them on the stage, it’s just so much more meaningful,” she said.

Born in Bennington, Vermont, Ms. Weiss moved with her family to the San Fernando Valley because of her father’s work as a press agent. “I’m an original Valley Girl,” she said.

The family returned to New York City when Ms. Weiss was a teenager, and she graduated from Brooklyn College, where she majored in education and psychology. She and Mr. Weiss met on April Fool’s Day in 1954, when Ms. Weiss was 19. They were married a year later.

After living in East Rockaway, N.Y., the Weills moved to Long Island before settling on the Upper East Side, where they raised their two children. They now live on the Upper West Side.

Ms. Weiss said her husband has been a tireless supporter of her commitment to Alvin Alley. There was a time when he grew tired of “Revelations,” the spirited piece that has become a crowd-pleasing staple of Alley’s repertoire.

But he quickly saw the error of his ways. “I decided being tired of it is not a good thing,” he joked. “So I’m not taking anymore.”

Ms. Weiss, on the other hand, said she continues to discover new things in “Revelations,” year after year. “It’s different every year,” she said. “It’s uplifting.”