

NEW·YORK·SOCIAL·DIARY



Lloyd Blankefein, Gail Geronemus, Susan Solomon, and Paul Goldberger at a NYSCF event hosted in summer 2007 at the home of John and Jodie Eastman in East Hampton.

By Nancy Rubling

I'm early, and Susan Solomon is running late, so I have time to run my eyes around her spare office, which is so close to Lincoln Center you can almost hear the musicians tuning up.

There are no family photos. There are no books. There isn't so much as a stained coffee cup. The bare white walls serve as a gallery backdrop only for her serviceable desk and pub-size table and pair of straight-back chairs.

After calling out to the receptionist with a plea of "strong tea," Solomon, the co-founder and CEO of The New York Stem Cell Foundation, apologizes for the space's lack of personality and personal possessions. The organization that she started at her kitchen table with **Mary Elizabeth Bunzel** in mid-2005 hasn't had its own office all that long, she says as she tosses the tired teabag into the trash.

But she invites to me take a peek at her Mac, whose desktop is filled with so many files that it looks like a starry sky, and starts calling up pictures. There's her oldest son – composer **Adam Hirsh**, aka **Adam Trees**, and his children, five-year-old **Thibeaux** and 20-month-old **Josephine**. Another digital snapshot shows her husband, New Yorker architecture critic **Paul Goldberger**, and their sons, **Ben Goldberger**, a reporter for the Chicago Sun-Times; and **Alex Goldberger**, a senior at Yale.

This isn't just a proud mother showing off her brood. These photos are a constant reminder to her of why she is devoting all of her time and energy to The New York Stem Cell Foundation.

The stylish Solomon, who looks like an avant-garde black-and-white art photo, isn't so much a dreamer as a doer. So when she tells me, matter-of-factly, that the foundation is out to find cures for all the major diseases of our times, it's as if she has informed me that she's having the oil changed in her car and is getting it back from the shop tomorrow.

It will work – it must work – she tells me as she sips her tea – because “the best minds believe that this is our best shot.”

The way she explains it makes it all sound so simple. All we have to do is get all the scientists, researchers and institutions to work together on this and – presto! – there will be no more Alzheimer's, Parkinson's or diabetes.

Stem cells, she asserts as she flips back her mane of coffee-color hair, are the black boxes of medicine's future. They will tell us how people become ill and will lead us to cures.

For Solomon, this is also a personal crusade. Her 25-year-old son Ben has had Type 1 diabetes since he was 10 and must take insulin shots daily. Other friends and family members have suffered or died from major illnesses, the kind stem cell research could have shed light on.



Susan Solomon takes a break from her frenetic day for a snap shot.



Michael Kramer and Susan Solomon

That's why this foundation must be successful, stresses Solomon, who is a founding member of New Yorkers for the Advancement of Medical Research and of the New York Council for the Joslin Diabetes Center. Because it affects every single person on the planet.

She's so passionate about the mission of The New York Stem Cell Foundation, in fact, that she gave up her corporate career to devote her life to it.

A lawyer by training and longtime health-care advocate, Solomon headed her own consulting business. She spent another part of her career building businesses in the media and entertainment industries. Among other things, she was the founding CEO of Sothebys.com and was chairman and CEO of Lancit Media Productions, an Emmy award-winning children's television production company.

Coming from any other person, Solomon's comments about the role of her foundation in fostering stem cell research might seem like pie in the sky. But this is a woman who is used to bucking the system to get what she wants.



Susan Solomon with Chuck Close and Roger and Carol Einiger at the NYSCF 2007 Gala.

Way ahead of her class and her time, this child of the 60s graduated from high before she was 16 and at 17 got married to the drummer for the anti-war band Country Joe and the Fish. At 18, she had her first son; at 20 she was divorced.

Now a single mother, she decided to do something that was all but impossible in that day and age: She went to college, then law school.



Steve Kroft and Susan Solomon at the home of John and Jodie Eastman.

“I didn’t have a nanny or housekeeper,” she says. “I had a patchwork quilt of babysitters from NYU around the corner. I did have a cleaning lady once a week, and I treated law school like a job. It was just something I had to do. I studied at night when the baby was asleep and on weekends, I went to my mother’s in Riverdale and studied there.”

She uses the same 60s can-do spirit in her work with The New York Stem Cell Foundation. The staff is young (picture a bunch of idealistic college students who are used to pulling all-nighters) and the enthusiasm is infectious.

“I love this work,” Solomon says. “We truly are making a difference.”

It’s getting late in the afternoon, the time when most people are heading for home. Solomon isn’t planning on leaving any time soon, even though that tea hasn’t really done its trick.

“This work definitely is for my children’s children,” she says. “I hope it will be for them, of course I would be delighted if it were for us. This is for future generations; it’s for Thibeaux and Josephine and Ben and his future children and Alex and his future children.” As she goes back to her Mac and as I disappear into Manhattan’s sea of rush-hour commuters, I know she is right.

Tomorrow, March 14th, in recognition of Women's History Month, Susan L. Solomon will be honored along seven other extraordinary women.