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Ad Executive, Seeking Retirement Project, Created Arts Center in Naples, Fla.

Myra Janco Daniels, who has died at age 96, wasn't ready to relax when she moved south



By *James R. Hagerty* [Follow](#)

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Around the age of 5, Myra Janco Daniels recalled, she was asked what she wanted to be when she grew up.

“In charge,” she replied.

Mrs. Daniels lived up to that ambition as an advertising executive who ran day-to-day operations at the Draper Daniels Inc. agency in Chicago. She became better known, however, for

a project she took on in the early 1980s after retiring in southwest Florida: creating an arts center, now known as Artis-Naples, from scratch.

Mrs. Daniels, who grew up in Gary, Ind., found her mission after attending a concert by a struggling chamber-music ensemble on Marco Island, near Naples. Unable to pay its musicians, the ensemble was playing in churches and schools. She offered to take charge of funding and eventually raised more than \$20 million to build and run an arts center that later included a museum. It opened in 1989, and The Wall Street Journal called it “a breathtakingly elegant cultural showcase.”

Mrs. Daniels served as the chief executive officer until 2011.

Her experience with advertising and Chicago arts organizations was crucial. “You have to believe in what you’re doing and then you have to get people involved to the point that they feel it’s theirs,” she said. “That’s what we did.”

Mrs. Daniels died June 22, three days before her 97th birthday.

“Myra may have been wrong from time to time but she was never in doubt,” said Byron Koste, a real-estate developer who helped her acquire prime land for the arts center. Without her dedication to the project, he said, it would never have been completed.

She was a demanding boss who clashed with some of her subordinates. Running the arts center “was always a stressful job because that’s what I liked,” she told Naples Illustrated in 2012. “I made the stress.”

In too many places, she said, arts organizations are splintered into fiefdoms. “Art people need to grow up and know there’s a piece of pie for everyone,” she told The Wall Street Journal in 1990. “Traditionally there’s been too much pettiness and jealousy.... The training of people in the arts is for segments; they don’t understand the broad scope, that the arts are a business.”

Myra Edith Janco was born June 25, 1925. Her mother had been an opera singer. Her father, whose health was poor, worked for a time as a real-estate agent. Young Myra was influenced by the spunk and self-confidence of her paternal grandmother, a real-estate broker.



Myra Janco studied business and communications at what is now Indiana State University in Terre Haute and pursued further business studies at Indiana University.

While in college, she began helping out with ads for the Meis Brothers department store in Terre Haute and soon was promoted to advertising chief, a full-time job she managed while pursuing her studies. She was especially proud of an ad proclaiming the latest cotton dresses as “cool as lemonade.”

At age 24, she invested \$200 to found a tiny ad agency in Terre Haute. One of her first clients was a coal company. She later taught marketing at Indiana University and in the early 1960s moved to Chicago to continue her advertising career.

In 1965, the Advertising Federation of America named her Advertising Woman of the Year. That recognition came shortly after Draper Daniels, a veteran advertising executive, bought a controlling interest in the Chicago agency where she was a senior executive. He became chief executive of the agency and appointed her as president and chief operating officer.

That meant managing men, something few women did at the time. “You have to take a man’s pride into account,” she told the Associated Press. “Most of all, men don’t want to be confronted with some kind of mother image. You slug it out verbally when you have to, but you can’t try to show men up. You have to work as colleagues.”

After about two years of working with her, Mr. Daniels abruptly proposed marriage. She already had a fiancé and resisted his pursuit briefly before agreeing to marry him.

In the late 1970s, Myra and Draper Daniels moved to Marco Island. He was ready to retire. She wasn’t.

After Mr. Daniels died of cancer in 1983, Mrs. Daniels devoted herself to making cold calls, raising money, recruiting musicians and conductors, and building a hall for them. A friend, Mary Ellen Hawkins, who was a state representative, encouraged and helped her.

She coaxed major donations out of the wealthy retirement community. Small gifts, such as \$100 to sponsor a brick, also were welcome. Donors could sponsor a seat or a hallway. “The only thing I think we haven’t sold are the urinals,” she said.

At one point, she had a choice of two possible sites, one in a new community featuring a Ritz-Carlton hotel and the other near a zoo known as Jungle Larry’s. She chose the Ritz.

Her philanthropic work also included support for a Salvation Army youth center and public broadcasting.

Mrs. Daniels had no children, and a brother died before her. She saw the Naples arts center as her legacy. “It is a blueprint I’m leaving,” she said, “a philosophy of how small and medium-size cities can have one umbrella organization and serve the arts.”

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