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Philanthropist Nicola Forrest. Picture: Matthew Poon

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## Nicola Forrest on wealth, love and dreaming big

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NICOLA Forrest is posing for photos in the sitting room of her Cottesloe home — a grand heritage mansion filled with art and family photos and dogs and children — and trying to drag two large columns of glass into frame. They are beautiful sculptures, huge spirals rising from the ground like wild bursts of suspended water.

“They’re Japanese,” she says, as she angles the heavy artworks into position. “We bought them from Sculpture by the Sea.”

Satisfied, she sits, asks if her shoes will be in frame and looks slightly horrified when told they will be. She eyes her espadrilles critically.

“Well, they are very comfortable,” she says.

Nicola is not being photographed because of her work with Sculpture by the Sea — the annual event on Cottesloe Beach that has become a summer staple, thanks in part to the patronage of Nicola and her husband, Andrew “Twiggy” Forrest. But, as always, she is keen to deflect attention from herself — even when she is the subject.



Nicola Forrest at her Cottesloe home. Picture: Matthew Poon

Nicola is no fan of the spotlight but when you're married to one of Australia's most recognisable businessmen a little celebrity is par for the course. She jokes that people used to approach Andrew on the street before turning to her and asking her to take a photo of them standing next to her husband.

"But lately I've been in the public eye a bit more, that's sort of changing," she says, in a tone suggesting she's not entirely convinced that's a good thing.

The success of her husband's company, Fortescue Metals Group, during the WA mining boom saw the Forrest family become one of the richest in Australia.

Last year, Forbes magazine estimated Andrew Forrest's wealth to be \$US1.67 billion. It's crazy money. Dangerous money. The sort of wealth that can be as much a curse as it is a blessing.

So they're getting rid of it.

The Forrests are two of Australia's most generous philanthropists. Since 2001, the couple have given away \$222 million to 230 individual organisations and programs. They have 40 active partnerships. Most of this giving is done through their philanthropic organisation, the Minderoo Foundation, named after the Pilbara cattle station Andrew grew up on. It's a family affair. Andrew is the foundation's chairman, Nicola's chief executive and the couple's oldest daughter, Grace, 22, is on the board.



Andrew and Nicola Forrest. Picture: Colin Murty

The Forrests were the first Australian signatories to Bill and Melinda Gates's The Giving Pledge, promising to distribute the majority of their wealth to philanthropic causes in their lifetime — meaning Grace and their other children, Sophia, 21, and Sydney, 16, will not inherit the Forrest fortune.

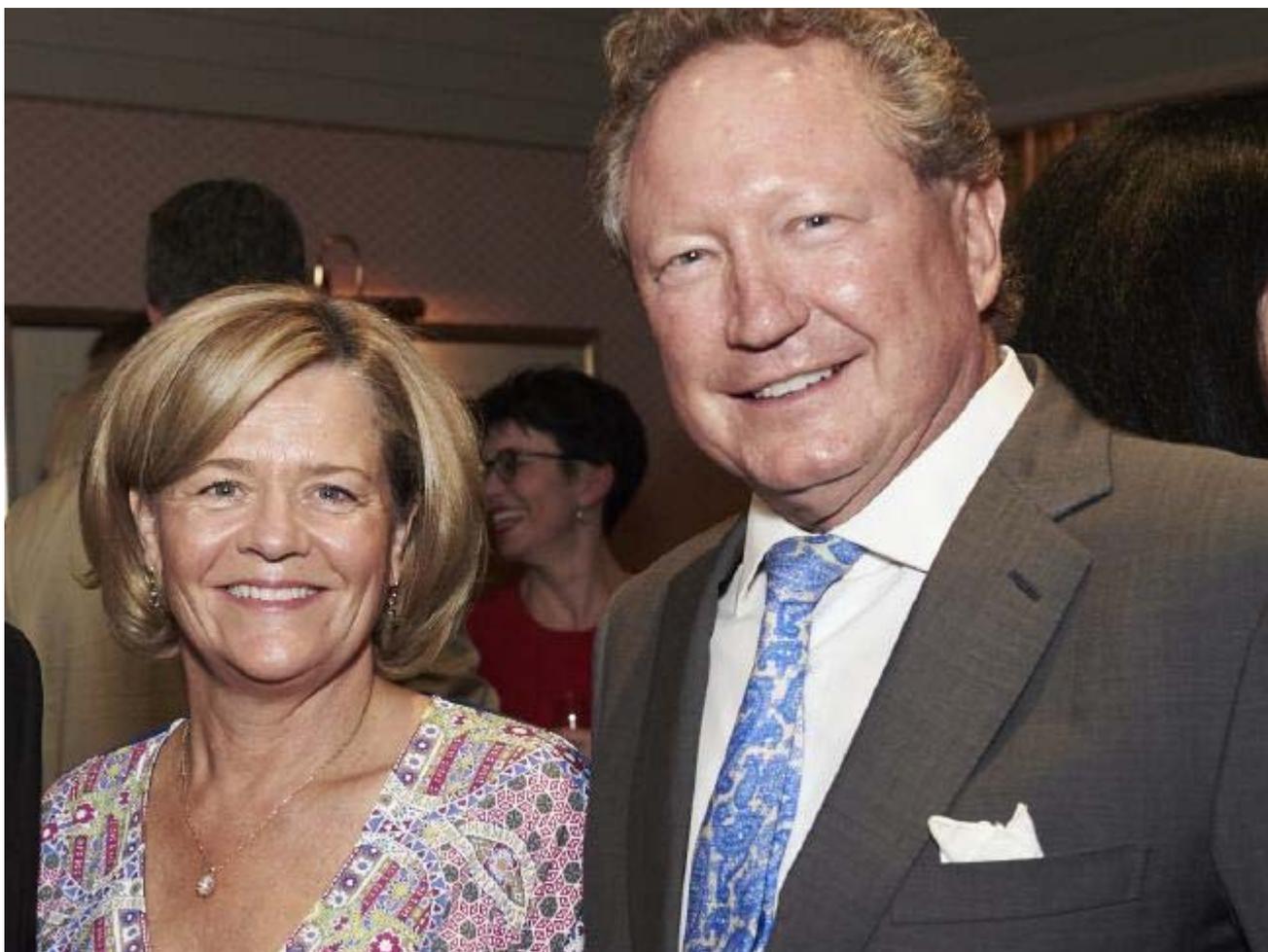
“Everyone wants the best for their children but lots of money is not the best for anybody,” Nicola explains. “It can corrupt. It can attract the worst sorts of people.

“You don't have to look far to see families who have had lots of money and it hasn't brought any happiness to them.”

Nicola speaks quickly and laughs a lot. She's warm and funny, with a dry sense of humour. She might not be as well known as her husband, but she is the driving force behind many of the family's interests.

“They are not the sort of philanthropists who write a cheque and sit back and let it happen. They roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty,” says Hayley Panetta, who has worked with the Minderoo Foundation for six years.

She describes her boss as “smart and quick”, and always running late. “Most meetings she has run over by half an hour, an hour, because she's always so engaged in the moment with the people she's meeting with and talking to,” Panetta says.



Nicola

and Andrew Forrest at a Black Swan Theatre Company dinner. Picture: Supplied

Nicola is a member of the Global Philanthropic Circle and the Prime Minister's Community Business Partnership. She is a patron of Impact 100 WA, which aims to facilitate and increase philanthropy, and Kimberley Foundation Australia, which funds research and preservation of Aboriginal rock art. And just to prove she has interests outside of general do-gooding, she is a board member of the Black Swan State Theatre Company.

When the conversation turns to a subject she is passionate about — ending global slavery, closing the gap of indigenous disadvantage — she leans forward to emphasise the urgency of the work. When she talks about one particular project close to her heart, a program to improve educational outcomes through early child care, she's on the edge of her seat.

"You are actually making a change, not just for those people's lives but for the whole community," she says. "You actually help that child reach their full potential."

The program at Challis Community Primary School in Armadale is Nicola's current major focus — what she calls her "lighthouse project". The school works with families of children up to five to get them classroom ready before they reach Year 1, improving their opportunities for academic success.

Nicola became involved after seeing the school's principal, Lee Musumeci, speak at a conference. She was so impressed she went to visit the school herself.

"I saw that it was really fantastic and I think I said, 'How can we help?'," she says.

Starting in 2009, and expanding in 2012 after Minderoo came onboard as major sponsor, the Challis program has seen remarkable results. In 2007, children at the primary school were well below the state average when it came to being ready to enter formal schooling; they now exceed the state average.

The results have been so positive that the Federal Government has committed \$20 million to roll out similar programs across the country, heralding what the Minderoo team hope will be a new direction for the foundation — moving more into funding cutting-edge programs, collecting evidence of their successes, and lobbying government for change on a larger scale.

"I've had to learn to be patient," Nicola admits. "You see a problem and think you know the answers but it's always a lot more complicated than that. If you really want to make change, you have to actually affect government policy and you need around seven years for that to happen and you need evidence."



The

launch of Buying Time, a campaign to raise funds for breast cancer support services in WA.

Picture: Marie Nirme

The Forrests have funded everything from a Men's Shed in Halls Creek to a visiting artist program at the WA Academy of Performing Arts. But, even with their massive fortune, they can't do it all.

In recent years Minderoo has streamlined its focus to three major programs: GenerationOne, aiming to end indigenous disparity; Thrive by Five, concentrating on early childhood initiatives; and Walk Free, which is just, oh y'know, working on the straightforward task of ending modern slavery.

"I know it seems like 'Oh my God! Take on the whole world!'," Nicola says of the foundation's slavery focus.

Walk Free was inspired by daughter Grace, who went on a school trip to Nepal when she was 15 and came home changed by what she saw. A few years later the family went to the country.

"We revisited the orphanage where Gracie worked and it was horrendous," she recalls, "because the children weren't there and there were no records and all this sort of stuff.

"And then we went and visited another orphanage that we still work with. There was a young girl sitting on a bed . . . and it was honestly the saddest thing I have ever seen in my life — this young girl just completely in shock — and Andrew tells this story about how she cried out of fear (when she saw us).

“When you see something like that, you can’t just walk away and just think, ‘Oh well, bad luck’, it’s just one of those moments.

“So that’s when I was like, ‘Well, how are we going to do this? This is dangerous and I don’t want Gracie involved’, and she was like, ‘Mum, this is what I really feel I want to be involved in in my life’.”

Her motherly concern is tinged with pride. Grace is at university as is her sister Sophia. Their son Sydney is finishing up high school.

“My children inspire me,” she says. “They have access to information and to technology and this next generation are not prepared to sit back and do nothing. They are so engaged with debate and issues. It’s great.”

When Nicola was her children’s age, it’s probably fair to say she wasn’t thinking too much about how to end global slavery. She grew up in country NSW, where “my horse was my best friend”, she says dryly. She describes an idyllic, if somewhat sheltered, childhood.

“I grew up believing everyone had equal opportunities and it’s been quite horrifying to me to see how untrue that is,” she says.



Nicola Forrest at her home with Yoda. Picture: Matthew Poon

She met Andrew after his mother, Judy, became friends with Nicola's parents.

"We often joke it was an arranged marriage," she says with a cackle.

Nicola's mother, Brooke Maurice, is an artist and Judy Forrest asked her to create a sculpture to commemorate her late husband, Woody Pearce. "(She made) this beautiful sculpture of a young girl in a pond looking out over the view and Mum took me to see the sculpture and to meet Jude," Nicola explains.

Judy Forrest extended an invitation to Nicola to attend a family party. There, a young Andrew asked for her number.

"He was very forward," Nicola recalls.

They dated, fell in love and then split. Nicola made the excellent break-up move of getting a glamorous job in Europe.

"I think it was the only time Andrew ever did what he was told," she says. "I said, 'Don't contact me!', and he didn't.

"I went to Europe and ended up getting a job with the UN. It was initially for three months and then I got offered a full-time job and then I let him know that I was contemplating taking a full-time job and he miraculously appeared in Vienna the next week."

So what was it the dashing young Andrew did to win her back? Nicola laughs. "Oh look . . . it's tricky to say that." She pauses, then offers: "It was on bended knee."



Andrew and Nicola Forrest donated \$65 million to the University of Western Australia's Century of Achievement program. Picture: Stewart Allen

Nicola is often painted as the quiet country girl, the woman who gave her husband a moral compass based on her own Christian beliefs. In *Twiggy: The High-Stakes Life of Andrew Forrest*, an unauthorised biography by journalist Andrew Burrell, Nicola is described as “a quiet, refined woman” and “the antithesis of Andrew Forrest, the party-boy stockbroker”.

So is it true? Is she really the strict Christian lass who tamed her wild husband? She roars with laughter.

“People often say that I’ve been this influence on Andrew and friends who grew up with me laugh and say, ‘Gawd! They clearly don’t know much about you, Nicola!’,” she says.

Her parents were deeply religious, and Christianity still plays a part in her life.

“I think having a belief that there is something greater than us makes us remain humble,” Nicola says. “Humility is a very important thing, and for our own children to grow up thinking of other people.

“There are things about human nature that are in all of us and I guess that’s what we all try to find — good and evil, right and wrong. You can call it Christianity.”

Nicola is a big-picture person — global slavery, the future of Australian children, the future of her own children and even the odd Japanese glass sculpture. In Nicola Forrest’s world, they are all of importance, but whatever makes the headlines, she is firmly in the picture.