

And so it begins....

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photo by Elisabeth Perez Luna

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My preparation for attending the grand opening of the new Barnes Foundation on the Parkway in Philadelphia began almost as immediately as I left the Foundation seven years ago. At times, reading articles, talking to former employees, or hearing the rantings of hypocritical neighbors and “friends,” would make my anxiety level wane or intensify. For this special weekend, I ordered fancy dresses, bought my plane ticket, and invited two friends to accompany me: one for each of the two gala celebrations.

It started with a Friday morning, 11 o'clock dedication and light refreshments. As I entered the downtown campus, I walked through what I imagine is a security checkpoint for future public visitors. Once inside the gates, the first name I saw on the wall was Neubauer Court, named for Barnes board vice chair, and president of Aramark, Joe Neubauer. The towering Ellsworth Kelly's sculpture of two rectangular shaped slabs of metal crowns a reflecting pool alongside the inner building façade. A modest, uninteresting array of Japanese maples flanks the courtyard walkway to the entrance of the building. It's only after making that turn towards the front door that you see the name, "The Barnes Foundation."

Upon entering the building I walked into a grand hall, filled with well-wishers, billionaires, politicians, bloviates, and board members. It was hard to imagine how many different types of greetings I would receive, but they indeed ran the gamut. There were lots of hugs, and more awkward moments than I care to count. One of the board members' wives asked me how I was doing, with the taint of pity in her voice. When I told her I was doing just fine and that I was finishing up my book, she asked me if the book was good. I said yes. She asked if it was accurate, and I said yes. When she asked me if it was angry, I asked her what could possibly have happened to make me mad? I moved on.

One of the event staff showed me to a seat in the front row, and said I could sit there if I wanted. I put my things down, but on my way over to the refreshments, I saw a reserved seat with my name on it, front and center of the doors to the gallery. Board president Bernie Watson passed me, and I extended my hand to shake his. I think he was as surprised as I was at my gesture. I saw docents, former staff members, and lots of supporters and friends who said they knew this all started with my work. I thanked them then went in the front and took my seat for the start of the program.

