

The Stoic Philanthropist: Robert Rosenkranz on His Giving

Ade Adeniji | June 4, 2025



Robert Rosenkranz. Credit: Rosenkranz Foundation

In the throes of quarantine, I spent several months watching old “Firing Line With William F. Buckley” episodes. No, it’s not that I have some great ideological kinship with the erudite man from Yale who always let you know it, but because I appreciated the range of guests and conversations on that program — a rare thing these days when everyone speaks in their own

echo chambers. I've felt similarly watching "Intelligence Squared US," a debate program now called "[Open to Debate](#)" that poses questions like "is it time to abolish the death penalty?" or "can constitutional free speech principles save social media itself?" That program, first launched in 2006, is still going strong two decades later.

Open to Debate's founding donor is Robert Rosenkranz, 82, a New York native who graduated summa cum laude from Yale as a teenager and went on to earn his law degree at Harvard. Rosenkranz chairs Delphi Capital Management, an investment concern with more than \$40 billion in assets under management, and founded a group of investment and private equity partnerships.

In 1985, at the height of his Wall Street career, Rosenkranz started the [Rosenkranz Foundation](#), baking in philanthropy early on as he built his wealth. Today, the foundation focuses on public policy, higher education and the arts. Released in May, his debut book, "[The Stoic Capitalist: Advice for the Exceptionally Ambitious](#)," entwines lessons from ancient thinkers like Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus with his own philosophies about business and philanthropy.

If you listen to Rosenkranz for even a little bit, you'll find that he rejects the conventional notion of "giving back" as restitution, of sorts, for something "taken," arguing that wealth creators often earn their fortunes by adding value to society, not by depleting it.

"I was from a very financially struggling family," Rosenkranz told me in a recent interview. "I had no role models at home or [in] my world, so I was reading biographies as role models.... Some of the ones that struck me most were business leaders who had used their talents and abilities to bring into being the things that they felt society needed."

That idea, that philanthropy should be an act of creation, not restitution, is central to Rosenkranz's worldview and what he calls the "selfish philanthropist" — a notion he riffs on in one chapter of "The Stoic Capitalist."

In my conversation with the veteran Wall Streeter, I learned more about how his upbringing influenced his business and philanthropic approach, why he decided to formalize his philanthropy so early, how his wife drives some of the foundation's arts giving, and his recent foray into new spaces — including longevity research.

A humble New York City upbringing and early philanthropy

Raised on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in a ground-floor, one-bedroom apartment, Rosenkranz is open about his humble beginnings. Imagine a neighborhood before the West Side Markets and posh coffee shops on every corner, and more akin to “West Side Story,” as he wrote in his book. His father was unemployed for several years, while his mother worked as a drugstore clerk to support the family. Sometimes, he wasn’t sure if the lights would stay on. These hardships made a lasting impact on Rosenkranz, turning him toward self-reliance and the biographies of famous figures for instruction at a young age.

But while Rosenkranz had his struggles, he’s also grateful that his father played word games and gave him other intellectual challenges. He also was able to attend P.S. 87, an innovative public school whose halls I was also fortunate to walk many decades later as a student. Here, an elementary school teacher took a special interest in him and encouraged him to transfer to private school on a full scholarship. Rosenkranz wound up at Yale at the age of 16 in 1959 and went on to graduate from Harvard Law School in 1965. He ascended the ladder on Wall Street, working at Oppenheimer Co., Rosenkranz & Co., and then serving as CEO of Delphi Financial Group until 2018.

In the midst of his career, in 1985, Rosenkranz had already laid groundwork for his foundation, which held around \$30 million in assets as of 2023, and gave away around \$6 million. The foundation’s early days were largely exploratory. “I wasn’t really that thoughtful at that point. I just felt it was an efficient way to deal with personal philanthropy,” Rosenkranz said, citing general interests in the arts, public policy and innovation. But over time, his philanthropic efforts became more strategic and impactful as he worked hands-on to transform institutions or build entirely new ones, channeling his early readings of Carnegie and Rockefeller.

An early example of this is at Yale, where he sat on the board of the university council. Richard Brodhead, a dean at the time, proposed a revision to the required curriculum, something that Rosenkranz acknowledged was an ambitious lift for faculty, not to mention involving the navigation of bureaucratic red tape. But quietly behind the scenes, Rosenkranz helped manage some of these obstacles, leading to meaningful changes in how students engage with scientific reasoning and cultural literacy. “I felt very good about that. That was one of the first really satisfying philanthropic things I did.”

That led to bigger giving at his alma mater, including a large, undisclosed gift to create Rosenkranz Hall, which opened in 2009, home of Yale’s school of international relations.

A birthday gift leads to a unique debate forum, Oxford-style

On his 63rd birthday, in 2005, Rosenkranz received a unique gift from his wife, art curator Alexandra Munroe. She hired a scholar who made an attempt at surveying the state of public discourse around the world. At the time, Rosenkranz was a donor and a board member of several right-of-center think tanks including the Manhattan Institute, but felt that their leadership and scholars were locked into preaching to the choir.

“The people who showed up at their meetings or events, the people who read their publications, all kind of believed in them already. And so I suggested debate as a way to reach out to people who might not already subscribe to these views,” Rosenkranz said.

Ultimately, the survey spotlighted a live debate forum hosted by the British organization Intelligence Squared, which staged Oxford-style debates on provocative public issues, with live audience voting. Rosenkranz was deeply impressed by the quality of the event and quickly secured the U.S. rights — shifting the American version to a nonprofit model. “I thought of it as venture philanthropy,” he said. “It still has the culture of a media company as opposed to a nonprofit... but I wanted it to have that feisty, entrepreneurial culture of a scrappy media operation.”

The first debates were held at the Asia Society auditorium in New York and were executive produced by Emmy-winning TV journalist Dana Wolfe. Growing from around 12 to 15 annual debates, Open to Debate now has weekly debates distributed by NPR, with its most popular episodes boasting millions of views on Youtube, including such provocative topics as “Were Israel’s Actions in the Gaza War Justified?” featuring Eylon Levy vs. Mehdi Hasan. Rosenkranz emphasized that the debates are not about “winning,” but about encouraging the audience to interrogate their beliefs and reconsider their views. “It was gratifying to see how much appetite there is for people to hear both sides of contentious issues,” he said.

Giving for the arts and extending the human “healthspan”

Rosenkranz dedicated his book to his “muse,” Alexandra Munroe, a senior curator in contemporary Asian art at the Guggenheim since 2006. Raised in Japan, she powers some of the couple’s arts giving, including chairing the Aspen Music Festival and School, a role she stepped into in 2024. The Rosenkranz Foundation has also supported The Met, MoMa and Museum of the City of New York, among others, with an eye toward New York City.

The couple’s latest foray in the arts is Canyon, a new cultural institution planned for the Lower East Side of Manhattan, billed as an innovative space to showcase immersive works at the intersection of visual art, sound, music and technology. While Rosenkranz isn’t as enmeshed in

the arts as his wife, he did talk about the arts as part of a broader way to enrich public life and build robust cultural institutions.

Rosenkranz also highlighted one of the foundation's newest interests, longevity and increasing human "healthspans" — not to be confused with lifespans. A main goal of the field is to extend the period while we're still healthy before we get the diseases of old age. Rosenkranz did a deep dive during the early days of the pandemic, reading David Sinclair's "Lifespan: Why We Age — And Why We Don't Have To," taking courses in molecular biology, and meeting all the top scientists in the field.

Initially, Rosenkranz thought that there was an opportunity to be a major funding leader in an underfunded field. But as he did more research, he discovered a surprising number of well-heeled organizations focused on the topic, including Altos (which he calls a "\$3 billion startup"), and the "billion-dollar" Saudi Arabia-based Hevolution Foundation, where Rosenkranz sits on the board. He has also been on the board of the aging-focused Buck Institute since 2022.

One recent development to note is a joint effort between the Rosenkranz Foundation and Hevolution to deploy "[Impetus Grants](#)," capital that can be more nimbly deployed toward a number of aging clinical trials, biomarkers, novel tools and model organisms. The latest round, \$10 million, was funded by the Rosenkranz Foundation and Hevolution. Already, Rosenkranz's support for this area appears to be bearing major fruit. A project he funded succeeded in extending the life of *C. elegans* worms from a meager 14 days to over a year — the largest extension of lifespan of any organism that has ever been achieved, he says.

Related Inside Philanthropy Resources:

For Subscribers Only

- [Rosenkranz Foundation](#)
- [Grants for Arts & Culture](#)
- [Grants for Higher Education](#)
- [Report: Giving for Higher Education](#)
- [Grants for Science Research](#)

A "stoic" capitalist and philanthropist looks ahead

You might wonder what “stoic” actually means to Rosenkranz, a self-described acolyte. Part of the answer lies in his approach to philanthropy.

In mid-May, Stanford announced the new Robert Rosenkranz Science and Engineering Quad, named in honor of a gift Rosenkranz made to fund new professorships in STEM subjects, as well as to support aging research. According to Stanford, the bequest is expected to be among the largest individual bequests or gifts ever received by the university.

Rosenkranz is not a Stanford alum, but that’s entirely the point. “I was trying to be — kind of, as a stoic — as rational as I could be about philanthropy and legacy,” Rosenkranz said, adding that most people are on “emotional autopilot” when it comes to higher education, giving to the places where they spent four years a half-century ago.

While he hasn’t neglected his own alma mater, Rosenkranz considered a range of universities but ultimately found Stanford to be the best home for the gift he wanted to make. “I was very pleased to make this announcement at Stanford. But I’m also looking at it as modeling the idea that in large scale philanthropy to higher education, don’t be on autopilot,” he said. “Give it to the institution that you think is going to do the best job in the field that you care about.”

Looking ahead, what did Rosenkranz have to say about the next chapter of his family’s philanthropy? The long-running foundation maintains a quiet web presence and a small board. Rosenkranz’s daughter Stephanie Hessler sits on the board along with Rosenkranz and Monroe. She’s an adjunct fellow at the Manhattan Institute. His son, Nicholas Rosenkranz, is a founding member of [Heterodox Academy](#), a nonprofit advocacy group of academics working to counteract what they see as a lack of viewpoint diversity on college campuses. Nicholas also runs the Rosenkranz Heterodoxy Fund, which has given recent grants to the Federalist Society and Yale.

“I think there are ages and stages,” Rosenkranz said, quickly pivoting to a broader observation about how some have been critical of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who’ve made big fortunes, but haven’t done anything that conspicuous in philanthropy. While some will no doubt disagree, Rosenkranz put it this way: “I guess what I would say about that is that first of all, I think that in most cases, the building of their business really contributed in a meaningful way to society.”

Still, he thinks that there might be a time, as there was with him, where their business concerns will give way to primarily philanthropic ones. Channeling the stoics again, he says that time, not money, is our scarcest resource. And for the octogenarian, he’s using his precious time for a well-lived life — with hands-on philanthropy, or “selfish” philanthropy, playing a key role.