



RITA SEMEL

# The Service-Minded Centenarian

Bob Woodward and Robert Costa. But the New York native and former journalist seems genuinely surprised to hear that San Francisco's reputation is sometimes negative in other parts of the country. "I think San Francisco is a wonderful city. It's welcoming

**O**ne morning last November, 400 people showed up at Congregation Emanu-El for the San Francisco Interfaith Council's annual Thanksgiving prayer breakfast. Yet this time, the ritual was different. There was no food, and much of the gratitude centered on one person: SFIC founder Rita Semel, who turned 100 earlier in the month.

"I don't really feel 100," muses Semel. But a few months on, one can still sense the lasting glow of the gathering on Lake Street, which included Bishop Marc Andrus, Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone, Mayor London Breed and Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who is a longtime supporter of Semel's work. (The feeling is mutual: "Every time I go into the Presidio, I say, 'Thank you, Nancy Pelosi,'" says Semel.)

Busybody. Questioner. These are words Semel uses to describe herself. Other people call her a unifier, to which she'll only accept partial credit: "Nobody does anything alone. I

don't care what they say, you have to be able to work with other people in order to accomplish something. I've been fortunate in the fact that I've worked with some wonderful people."

For the past two years, SFIC, which was founded more than three decades ago, has been helping the City's 800 communities of faith find new and safe ways to hold services; meet with staff and boards; and stay connected to isolated congregants. All along, Semel was at the forefront, attending virtual meetings at Grace Cathedral and Congregation Emanu-El, where she serves on boards, and providing guidance during SFIC's weekly Zoom meetings.

"She's my right and my left hand," acknowledges SFIC executive director Michael Pappas.

That cliché query "What's your secret to longevity?" doesn't garner an immediate answer from Semel, though she notes that her own mother lived to be 99 ("I guess maybe it's in the genes"). As far as Semel's lifestyle, she says, "I'm a terrible sleeper. I don't do exercise, I never have. ... I like a glass of wine with dinner."

Semel subscribes to two daily papers, as well as *The New Yorker*, and recently tackled *Peril by*

to so many different kinds of people," says the Pacific Heights denizen. "And, yes, of course we've got our problems, but what other city doesn't?"

Semel's goal for San Francisco — and the world, for that matter — is much the same as it has always been: "I'd like to see a day when people accept everyone for who they are — and understand that we all have something to contribute — and we don't have to deal with anti-Semitism, racism, Asian prejudice and the things that divide us," she says.

Thanks to the Rita R. Semel Endowment Fund for Interfaith Work, established on its namesake's 90th birthday, SFIC may be there for that day. At the Thanksgiving celebration, the fund swelled with donations, including a significant gift from Joan and Robert McGrath's Celebrate Foundation.

"We far surpassed the \$100,000 goal because people wanted to do something for Rita," says Pappas. "The intent is to perpetuate Rita's vision of interfaith harmony and service to our city."

— Jennifer Blot