

# AVENUE

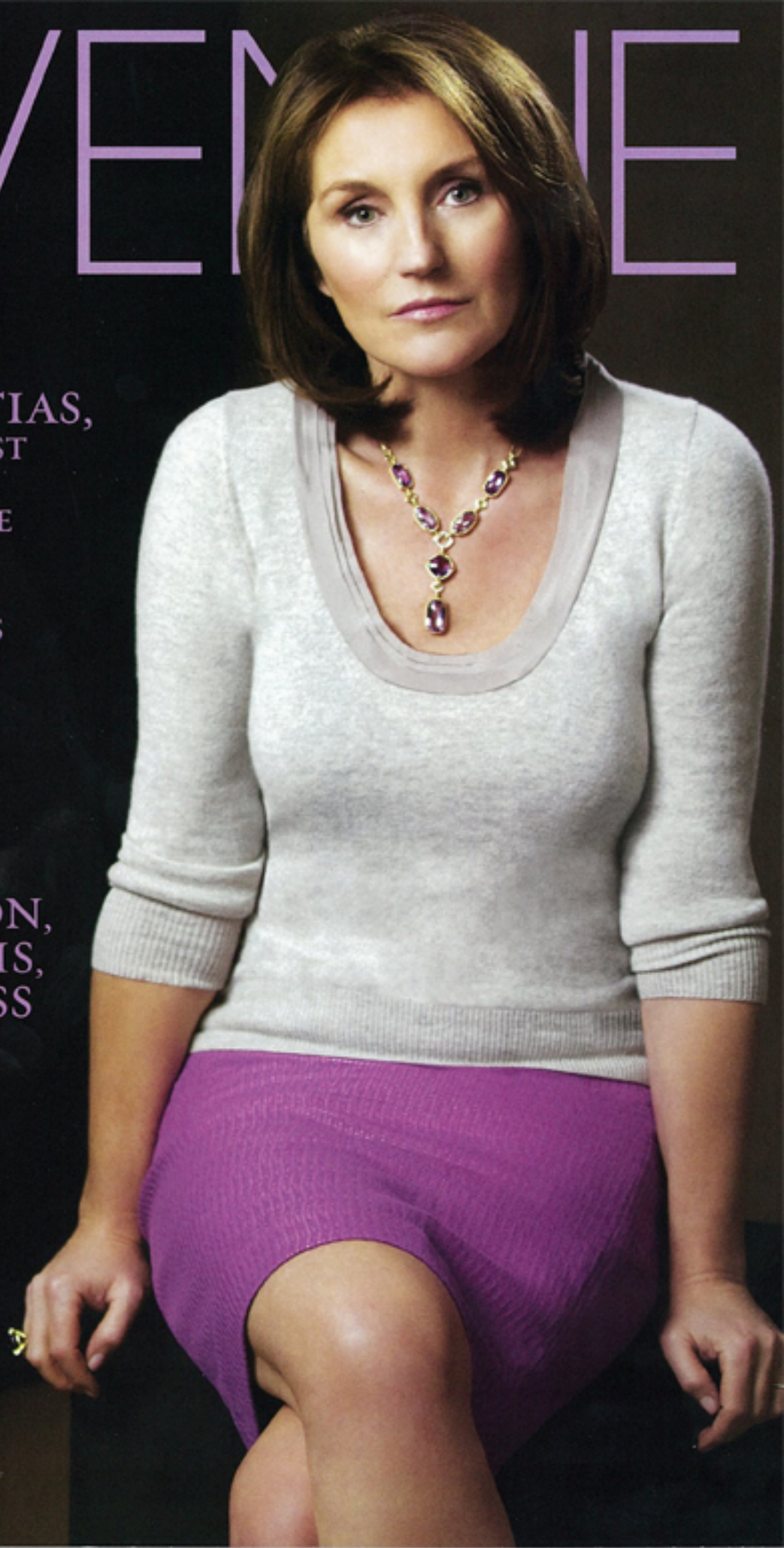
FEBRUARY 2010

CÉCILIA ATTIAS,  
THE FORMER FIRST  
LADY OF FRANCE,  
REVEALS WHY SHE  
HAS BECOME A  
NEW YORKER  
AND ANNOUNCES  
HER UPCOMING  
GLOBAL FORUM

FISCAL ADVICE  
FOR NY FROM  
ARIANNA  
HUFFINGTON,  
DICK MORRIS,  
WILBUR ROSS  
AND OTHERS

PEGGY  
SIEGAL  
ON THE SET OF  
WALL STREET 2

*Cécilia Attias, president and  
founder of the Cécilia Attias  
Foundation for Women*









# What She does for Love

by JANET ALLON ■ photographed by JACK DEUTSCH ■ styled by CRICKET BURNS

**Cécilia Attias**, the most recent ex-first lady of France, has just landed in New York with her new husband, her new life and the launch of her new foundation, which kicks off a global forum in New York in June. You may remember the story. It was not too long ago, a modern-day abdication, not unlike Edward VIII and Mrs. Simpson—just the other way around. Cécilia left Nicolas Sarkozy just a few months into his presidency, but not before she made headlines around the world for her courageous rescue of five Bulgarian nuns from torture and certain death in Libyan leader Col. Muammar al-Qaddafi's prison, a feat that no one before her had been able to achieve. Her new foundation, the Cécilia Attias Foundation for Women, will continue her important work, rescuing women around the world who live in conditions that put them in desperate need of help. Janet Allon caught up with the new Mrs. Attias to find out more about her ambitious plans.

*Hair by* ANDREW DEEP FOR DE BERARDINIS SALON ■ *Makeup by* TALIA SHOBROOK  
WITH THE WALL GROUP

**Opposite page:** Suit by Barbara Bui, Shirt by Dolce & Gabbana, Necklace by Yael Sonia.



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elping to free the Bulgarian nurses was a turning point for Cécilia Attias. It was a kind of intuition that spurred her to go on the mission to Libya.

Having heard of the plight of five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor who had been held and tortured in a prison in Libya for nine brutal years—and sentenced to death several times—Cécilia told her then-husband, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, that she wanted to go to Tripoli with the diplomat from the European Union to try her hand at winning their release. “Maybe I can help,” she said. “Go ahead,” the president of France told her.

The case was as heartbreaking as it was complicated. Hundreds of Libyan children who had been treated at the hospital where the six medics worked had been infected with AIDS, and many had died. But the six healthcare workers were widely seen as falsely accused scapegoats in the tragic situation. Once in Libya, Cécilia was allowed to see the nurses, who were in terrible shape. “They were dying: one was suicidal, one was dying of cancer. The Palestinian doctor had been badly beaten,” she remembers with a shudder.

She was given an audience with Libyan leader Col. Muammar al-Qaddafi, who listened to her argument that releasing the medics would send a signal to the rest of the world that Libya was opening up, a message he wanted to send. She offered to meet with the families of the children, who blamed the nurses and wanted revenge. She even offered to live with the nurses in prison. “I was not afraid,” she remembers. Somehow, Qaddafi heard her. “He’s a very strange man, but he kept his word,” she says. “The whole time I was there, I did not sleep or eat. I was going on pure adrenaline.” When the plane carrying the six medics and Cécilia landed in Sofia, Bulgaria, she was hailed as a hero. Only then did she let the emotions flood in, spending four solid hours locked in a bathroom, weeping.

Back in France, the letters poured in—letters from women all over the world—from Iran, Afghanistan, Africa. “Help us,” they all said. Maybe she could, Cécilia thought. And thus, the idea for the Cécilia Attias Foundation for Women was born. Two years later, she has moved to New York with her new husband, global events producer Richard Attias, to launch her foundation and hold a groundbreaking forum to identify the most critical issues confronting women throughout the

world, and to give voice to grassroots groups that are truly addressing these problems. The forum will go beyond mere talk. She plans to produce a concrete plan of action.

“The thing about Cécilia is that she has no ego,” observes Richard Attias. “She demonstrated that by leaving her position as first lady of France. She is definitely a doer, as she has demonstrated many times in her life, in Libya and in France, working on behalf of women.”

Cécilia’s friend, CNN correspondent Christiane Amanpour, has been impressed with her ever since they met at The Women’s Conference in California, hosted by the state’s first lady, Maria Shriver. “I was struck by her commitment to the issue of women’s rights,” Amanpour says. “Cécilia is a very thoughtful person, not only as a friend, but as a professional, too.”

The word stature comes to mind when you meet Cécilia

Attias. In every sense of the word, her scale is grand, heroic even. It is not just her height, though at 5-foot-10, hers is a commanding presence. She seems born for big things, destined to live a big-screen life, the kind that other people read about and aspire to. She fits the role of a warrior woman fighting on behalf of others far less fortunate, a world, or just a subway

ride, away. Like the nurses, you want her on your side.

Television personality, model and author Dayle Haddon has always been impressed. “I find her to be a magnificent person. She’s charismatic in so many ways. She’s kind of a glamazon, without being glitzy,” Haddon says. “She’s just so fearless in how she lives her life.”

Cécilia’s backstory alone is epic. She may be the only woman in the history of the western world who gave up the position of sitting first lady for love. Her story is reminiscent of Edward VIII, who sacrificed his throne for the love of a woman—American divorcée Wallis Simpson. After helping Nicolas Sarkozy become president of France, and several months as first lady working on behalf of women’s rights at the French Interior Ministry, Cécilia left the Élysée Palace, and divorced the president to marry the great love of her life, businessman Richard Attias. Six months later, they were wed at the Rainbow Room in Rockefeller Center. Cécilia had, as she says, “completely turned the page.”

Now, the couple has made their home in New York City. “It’s a melting pot. You can meet people from all over the world. You

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can meet someone and just click. That does not happen in France," Cécilia explains. "New York is diverse, and I am diverse. My father was from Russia. My mother was from Spain. I have relatives everywhere. I am outside of the box. You cannot lock me in a box. Believe me, they tried."

*"le pouvoir derrière le rideau."* Translation: the power behind the curtain.

The Cécilia Attias Foundation for Women seeks out, supports and partners with organizations all over the world that are on the frontlines of helping women in dire straits. In

She is sitting in the conference room of her foundation on the Upper East Side wearing a grey wool pants suit, which highlights her stunning silhouette. In other rooms of the townhouse, multilingual employees unpack boxes and set up shop. She gives a tour of her office, chicly adorned with white lacquer tables, mirrored file cabinets and colorized photos of the Eiffel Tower. On the wall of the conference room is simply a huge map of the United States, her adopted home.

"You have a fabulous country here," she says. "Because you are American, you might not appreciate it. You have all kinds of climates, all kinds of terrain, all kinds of light. We are trying to go to every state because every one is so different. I love this country. I feel at home here. It is not like other countries." And she has been to many of them. She travels the world widely, giving speeches on behalf of women's rights and earning humanitarian awards.

But one of the things she loves about her newly adopted home is the positive, can-do attitude. "Even when it is raining here, there is energy," she says. "People are positive. That is why I believe you will pull out of this economic crisis before we will."

The belief that it is possible to achieve difficult things on behalf of others is very much a part of who Cécilia Attias is, and it underpins the foundation she has started with its bold mission to "change the world." She also firmly believes that it is women who will be in the vanguard of that change. As the apt French expression says, women are

**Above:** Cocoa brown double-faced wool denim dress by Melograno Editions (to order, please call 646.368.0282). Cable and Tapestry Silver Ice Cuff in sterling silver and diamonds and Amethyst Cushion Cocktail Ring in 18-karat gold with pave diamonds, both by David Yurman.





Cécilia with Richard Attias,  
owner of The Experience by  
Richard Attias

**On her:** Navy blue cashmere dress by Ralph Lauren. Daisy cocktail ring in citrine by Asprey. Earrings by Tiffany & Co. **On him:** Grey suit by Ermenegildo Zegna. Tie by Charvet. Watch by Patek Philippe.



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**—Cécilia Attias**

New York, for example, the foundation supports Hour Children, a Queens-based organization founded by Sister Tessa Fitzgerald that helps women in prison reinsert themselves into society through schooling, counseling and services for their children. “When Cécilia came to our facility, she just clicked with the women, one on one,” Sister Tessa says. “She was there to listen to their story. She really gets it.” Another partner is Toutes à l’école, which helps create schools in developing countries. There is also Faith, Hope, Love Ministries of Ukraine, Inc., a group that helps victims of sex trafficking in that country.

In June, Cécilia’s foundation will host an ambitious forum in New York called “Dialogue for Action.” Each continent will be represented by three NGOs (non-governmental organizations), which will identify the major issue faced by women and children in that region,

from healthcare to poverty, from sex trafficking to excision. There will be six sessions in all, with 150 people participating in each, capped with a large fundraising dinner. The idea is not just to bring issues and people to the table, but to mobilize for action, to create an outline of that action plan and that commitment. Like her husband, who produced Davos and who owns global event management company The Experience by Richard Attias, which is also producing the forum, Cécilia is committed to creating “a new kind of event—one that will help make a difference.”

“It was Richard who suggested that I launch the foundation,” says Cécilia. And it was also Richard who suggested that she do it in New York. “This is a country where children are raised to give back,” she says. “Everyone wants to help. That’s why I landed here.” ♦