

Woodruff donation helps to lift Atlanta Ballet



Maria Saporta

The Atlanta Ballet enjoyed two positive developments in the last few days.

First, longtime Atlanta business and arts leader **Virginia Hepner** agreed to take over as the Atlanta Ballet's interim executive director to fill the spot of **Barry Hughson**, who is taking the top job at the Boston Ballet.

Then the Robert W. Woodruff Foundation made a \$1 million commitment toward the Atlanta Ballet's \$14.8 million campaign. That brings the current level of contributions to the campaign to more than \$12 million.

"The campaign has great momentum," Hepner said. "It is a fabulous gift. No only is it a meaningful amount, but it's an affirmation about what the Woodruff Foundation thinks of the ballet, the campaign and the arts in general."

Hepner said she expects to stay in her interim role through the end of the summer, but that she is willing to stay on until a permanent executive director has been identified.

"I certainly will be happy when we find the right person," she said. "We've already started a national search."

And given the economy, Hepner believes there's a lot of talent available.

This is not the first interim community role Hepner, who retired from a 25-year career in banking in 2005, has taken. She served as an interim executive director of Brand Atlanta. And she has chaired a host of arts and cultural organizations in Atlanta.

"You just can't keep me down," Hepner said, laughing, when contacted by phone. "I keep trying to stay strictly business, but the arts just keep drawing me back in."

Hepner said the Atlanta Ballet has made great progress artistically and organizationally, and she wanted to do all she could to continue the momentum. It all goes back to the importance of the arts in society.

"The arts and culture are tremendous assets to our community," Hepner said. "The ballet is one of many organizations that need our help and attention. In these challenging times, it's not just the organizations that need our support, but it is the arts and culture experiences we have that allows us perspective, hope and a welcome respite from our troubles. We need the arts as much as the arts need us."

INVESTING IN EARLY EDUCATION.

A high-powered group of metro Atlanta business and civic leaders are launching an early-education initiative to improve the opportunities for children to be successful in school and throughout their lives.

Dennis Lockhart, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, and **Beverly Tatum**, president of Spelman College, are co-chairing the initiative that was started by the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta.

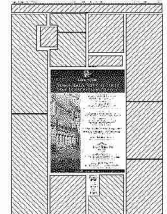
Lockhart said the group hopes to present a set of recommendations to the community at large by the end of the year. So far, research has shown that investing in early education — before children enter kindergarten — ends up saving money in the long run. Children are better prepared to succeed in school, which in turn leads to people having more productive lives, and society having fewer social costs through lower unemployment and less crime.

"There's a 'pay me now or pay me later' idea," Lockhart said. "There's good evidence that investing in childhood education can alleviate some of those expenses. I really believe this is high-potential territory."

"I think we'll come up with some bold recommendations."

There have been efforts in Georgia and metro Atlanta to invest in early education, but the state still lags behind many when it comes to children's welfare.

According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2007 data,



Georgia ranks 41st in overall child well-being; 45th in teens not attending school and not working; and 47th in the percent of teen high-school dropouts.

“There is some success that Georgia has achieved,” Tatum said.

“Certainly we do want to be a leader. We have found out that the biggest benefit comes from targeting young children living in poverty. One of the challenges I see relative to our efforts in Georgia is that they are not particularly targeting the neediest children in the region.”

Lockhart and Tatum spent part of last year traveling to different communities to see what works. The Federal Reserve in Minneapolis had a model program, both said. The hope is that metro Atlanta and Georgia will be able to benefit from finding how other areas have been successful.

“The goal of the commission is to bring together a group of well-connected Atlanta leaders who could learn more about this issue and see how we could make a difference by helping shape public policy,” Tatum said.

The 29 members of the commission include philanthropist **Stephanie Blank**, Superintendent **Beverly Hall** of Atlanta Public Schools, U.S. Sen. **Johnny Isakson**, Woodruff Foundation’s **Russ Hardin**, former U.S. Sen. **Sam Nunn**, Waffle House CEO **Joe Rogers**, United Way of Metro Atlanta President **Milton Little**, 100 Black Men of Atlanta CEO **John Grant** and the Goizueta Foundation’s **Maria Elena Retter**.

“We wanted to get a spectrum of prominent citizens, a high-level group whose recommendations would be taken seriously,” Lockhart explained.

“We are going to make a recommendation to the community, not to government or a single sector. Our recommendations will address a variety of interested parties on how to move Atlanta from a position of reasonable strength to leadership.”

MNN A HOME RUN. It’s been exactly three months since the Mother Nature Network, a comprehensive environmental Web site based in Atlanta, has been launched.

And it already is among the top five environmental Web sites in the country, according to founder and CEO **Joel Babbit**.

Several major developments are under way:

MNN is just launching its state-by-state Local Reports — giving users a chance to learn about what is happening in their communities.

It has hired **Jim Berrien**, retired chairman of Forbes magazine, as its president and chief operating officer.

It had 200,000 unique visitors in the month of March, and its traffic has been doubling every month.

It has secured seven major category sponsorships (in lieu of advertisers), including Southern Co., AT&T, Dell Inc., Norfolk-Southern, Premier Global and Miller-Coors.

Rolling Stones keyboardist **Chuck Leavell**, who is a co-founder, has been doing videos for sites including interviews with some of the country’s top artists including **Ludacris**.

MNN has secured the rights for 24 episodes of Captain Planet, a pet project of **Ted Turner**.

“Our goal is to be the most trafficked environmental site in the country,” Babbit said in a recent interview. “We also want to provide the most accurate news available, and we want to be the most engaging site possible.”

MNN, which started with an equity investment of nearly \$10 million, now has 17 employees. And it has close to 60 correspondents who will be contributing to its local, state-by-state network.

For Berrien, MNN was just the opportunity he didn’t know he was looking for.

“It fit my criteria for ever going back to work again,” Berrien said in an interview. “It had to matter to me. I wasn’t ever going to go back into pure media again. And third, I wouldn’t commute every day to New York. Instead, I’m commuting to Atlanta.”

Berrien, 56, said he was contacted by a friend in the search business.

He had a telephone conversation with Babbit on a Saturday morning, flew down to Atlanta that Monday and met with several board members, and he was offered and accepted the job on Tuesday.

“It just felt right,” said Berrien, 56, an avid

outdoorsman. "Joel is a genius. The product makes sense. The idea is perfect, timing-wise. It was brilliant of Joel to recognize this opportunity. Our site is engaging, entertaining, fun and super-current."

Berrien and Babbit have a list of 200 prospects who are potential sponsors, and they will end up with about 30 sponsors, not including those for the local reports. "We are giving people the tools to change the world," Berrien said.

Two of MNN's top investors also are pleased. Cousins Properties Inc. CEO **Tom Bell** said the "site is exceeding all our expectations." And retired Georgia-Pacific CEO **Pete Correll** chimed in: "It's been a home run all the way."

GEORGIA ROLLS OUT RED CARPET.

If it's the Masters, it means the Red Carpet Tour is here.

This is the 50th anniversary of the Red Carpet Tour, one of the top annual economic development initiatives put on by the state and the Georgia Chamber of

Commerce.

The tour invites economic development prospects to come to the state and also attend the Masters Tournament in Augusta. This year, 23 prospects from the United States, South Africa, Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom representing diverse industries (from logistics, solar products to aircraft maintenance) are participating in the Red Carpet Tour.

Each year the tour spotlights particular areas in Georgia, and this year, Atlanta will be on display, including dinner at the Governor's Mansion and a visit to the Georgia Aquarium.

Georgia Chamber President **George Israel** said the tour has stood the test of time and has proven to be a successful economic development tool. This year, however, the number of prospects are down.

Back in 2006, there were 46 guests, and that number dropped to 37 in both 2007 and 2008.

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