

Cheryl Mendelson

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Creativity...it's not just what gives life to great works of art be it visual, books, dance, music, poetry or theatre. Creativity also fuels ideas behind projects that seek to be bold and not fit into the ordinary. Cheryl Mendelson is the CEO of the Van Wezel Foundation and she's using creativity as well as her considerable background in strategic planning and fundraising to bring to fruition probably this area's most ambitious project ever: the Sarasota Performing Arts Center or SPAC.

Their website describes SPAC as "... a public-private partnership with the City of Sarasota and in collaboration with the Bay Park Conservancy and the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall." The Van Wezel Foundation, which Cheryl runs, is leading the way with SPAC.

Though in its early stages, when completed, Sarasota's bayfront will have a state of the art performance hall that's bigger, more flexible, and more energy efficient. Being much larger, it will be capable of drawing those big shows that routinely pass Sarasota by. SPAC will be a part of the 53-acre parcel owned by the City of Sarasota that has been the Van Wezel parking lot and not much else. A preliminary drawing (though not a final) shows a modern design with a performance hall, that, in addition to its bigger size, bigger stage, better acoustics and the like, will also have an additional, smaller, flexible performance space.

The dynamic plan to move forward with SPAC was approved in 2018. The "civic asset" as it's called, will have more than just a place to see shows. It will also be a park that meanders around the hall on land and over the bay. And it will be built with the future in mind for when sea levels inevitably rise and will thus sit atop "stilts" due to its close proximity to the water.

Expect a 230,000 square foot venue with 2250 seats plus another 400 seats at the second performance space. Plus, there's a 10,000 square foot education and lifelong learning center while outside has multiple places for performances. It will cost in the range of \$250 to \$275 million.

Many of us are emerging from our Covid-induced cocoon. Arts organizations and arts leaders are no different. Cheryl worked at the VW, but moved when the virus took hold and works at space offered by SPAC board member Mark Famiglio at his pink building in downtown Sarasota.

Cheryl left the chilly shores of Chicago in 2019 for sub-tropical Sarasota. Weather extremes aside, there is the daunting challenge of envisioning and bringing SPAC to fruition. This is the critical stage if you have Cheryl's job — raising money, gaining support and seeing the project through its early stages to completion.

For having lived here just three years, she's been a quick study of the area's zeitgeist. "People chose Sarasota," she observes, and thus "they want to make it the best." She's noted there are 300 some nonprofits in Sarasota County alone, which speaks to "People committing to serve." Her board reflects that as well and many are well-traveled and from diverse backgrounds. They bring "global perspectives and expectations," she notes and her board is also "rich with knowledge."

Prior to Sarasota, Cheryl was Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer at the Harris Theater in Chicago's Millennium Park. "Chicago is a big city, but in many ways a small city with pragmatic midwesterners," she notes which, with the exception of size, sounds similar to Sarasota. Millennium Park, she adds, became a "cultural gateway with public art, an arts center, outside concerts," not just a performance center and that experience has shaped her vision for SPAC.

Over her career Cheryl has worked in education (VP of Institutional Advancement and Chief Marketing Officer for Erikson Institute where she completed a \$58 million Impact and Influence campaign), health (13 years at the Shirley Ryan Ability Lab where she led campaigns raising \$150 million to establish clinical and research programs), and most recently, EVP and COO at the Harris Theater in Chicago's Millennium Park. There she planned the strategic vision for the Theater and was the chief architect for the \$38 million Imagine Campaign, which achieved 60% of goal in the first year.

Why this job? "The project drew me," she explains and adds, "there aren't that many opportunities to build a legacy project." In fact, there are few projects in the nation of this size and scope in the pipeline. Personally, the arts mean a lot to her - her parents loved the arts and they were for her family "an important part of our lives. I've always been a patron of the arts. It's the power of the arts to inspire." She's seen it in her life and especially with her son Harris who has a disability. For him, the arts have been "a great equalizer, a place to express himself without judgment." Her other son, Bennett, is in e-commerce and like his mother, is a creative thinker and his exposure to the arts at an early age fed his "entrepreneurial spirit," she explains.

Covid has kept her from what professional fundraisers do best: meet potential donors, give speeches, go to events, etc., in what she calls a "high touch" business. Like so many, she went online to stay in touch with donors. The Foundation "pivoted" and brought all its programs online and served over 40,000 students across five counties.

So, what question is she asked first about the new SPAC? We both simultaneously laughed as we both had the same correct answer: that darn center aisle. Yes, she reassures everyone, there will be a center aisle and thus an end to climbing over endless sets of knees to get to or from your seat.

But back to being serious, what she hears most is how can I help? Which is reassuring due to the many moving parts - the design, the center's use, the grounds, traffic, the cost, etc., that can, in a vocal community like Sarasota, draw critics. What exists now is a concept. That illustration on the WCW cover is a wish list of sorts. It's an illustration that contains all the punch list/must-have factors worked in. What SPAC and its surrounding area will ultimately look like is months away and subject to change. "It's a concept," she explains referring to the rendering and adds, "vision is never a straight line."

And then there's the Van Wezel (which she does not run - that's Mary Bense's job). What will happen to the purple people seater that we all find as a Sarasota icon? "The city is putting together a blue-ribbon committee and is doing an engineering study," she explains and that will look in depth at the 50-plus year old structure. It can't be elevated to protect it from rising sea levels and, due to the fact it sits along Sarasota Bay, it's exposed to salt water and tropical storms. But it will be very much in use until the other hall is completed and ready for use which could take six years. SPAC's RFP (request for proposal) is scheduled for this fall and that itself will take six to nine months.

For now, the site is quiet. The Bay Park Conservancy, another not-for-profit organization in partnership with SPAC and the city, completed a half-mile, 10-foot sidewalk walkway back in April that wraps around the Bay Park's coastal area.

Though she works very hard and has a laser focus on SPAC, Cheryl finds time to tool around town with her husband, Kevin Jackson, in their convertible or takes to the water on their boat. They both love the arts and "feel blessed to be in this gorgeous environment." 🍷

STORY: Louise Bruderle

IMAGE: Evelyn England