

Michèle Des Verney Redwine



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If it seems that the west coast of Florida draws activists and arts lovers, Michèle Des Verney Redwine is another stellar example of that pattern being truth. And she also proves Newton's First Law of Motion that states that a body in motion at a constant velocity will remain in motion.

She shared with me her long and varied and busy career. Put it this way, when someone tells you that at one point she was traveling 48 out of 52 weeks of the year, well, that's a busy and engaged individual. Another way of putting it, Michèle arrived in Sarasota in 2004 and since then has served on a half dozen boards and committees including the Ringling, Hermitage Artist Retreat, Realize Bradenton, Gloria Musicae and Florida Studio Theatre. And in 2017 she and some colleagues started Suncoast Black Arts Collaborative which is about to launch its first ever Arts & Racial Justice Panel Series. And, she's an artist who creates beautiful ceramics.

Prior to Sarasota, Michèle started life in New York City—Harlem to be specific—raised in a middle class family by parents who stressed education. Michèle attended the Dalton School on the upper east side and went on to study art education and earned her BFA degree from Boston University as well as a Certification in Equal Employment Opportunities from Cornell University. She worked in arts and educational administration for years at both independent and public schools.

Her career expanded to include being an employment opportunity specialist where she had leadership roles in nonprofit organizations, public sectors, educational institutions, and government. More specifically, as a diversity education consultant, Michele worked to develop innovative diversity initiatives, policies, practices, programs and leadership strategies.

At one point in her career, she worked with then-governor Jeb Bush on Take Stock in Children (a nonprofit that provides scholarships to low-income students in Florida), which had her not just in Broward County, but all throughout the state as well. Her consulting work has taken her all over the country to places like Chicago (where she once met Michelle Obama), Texas, California, Connecticut and D.C. Michèle also had her own firm, Diversity in Education.

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Her husband's busy career with IBM meant they moved every 3-4 years. Michèle would then find her place in the workforce in their newest home which took them to many places. He passed away in 1997 and Michele continued to work and came to Sarasota in 2004 ostensibly to retire and join her many friends and contacts in the area.

It wasn't long before she reached out to Florida Studio Theatre's Kate Alexander (Associate Director at Large), asking, "Can we collaborate?" A big "yes!" was the response. Michele has contributed to FST's Forum program since 2014 and served on the Steering Committee for Forums: Dialogues on Diversity during the 2014-2015 season.

She also worked on the Suffragist Project's outreach team and was on its Steering Committee, facilitating events and meeting with community organizations. She was also vital to the planning of the Black Suffragists Remembered panel discussions.

Kate Alexander describes Michèle as "a formidable addition to the Forum committee. She's a woman who has vision, and yet, is not afraid of working in the trenches to achieve her goals. From being center stage with an audience to galvanizing the community in

its effort to be more inclusive, she is a powerhouse woman to all who work with her."

Michèle admits to having been "hooked on boards," but still had as her goal of working on the issue of diversity in the arts. In 2017, Michèle and like-minded colleagues founded the Suncoast Black Arts Collaborative (SBAC).

SBAC's mission is "To advocate for greater exposure to African American Artists throughout the Suncoast Arts community" and "To provide educational forums/symposia to expose students and arts patrons to the work of African American Artists." Supporting minority young people is "crucial," Michèle emphasizes.

In 2020, SBAC co-sponsored the Black Muse Exhibit with Manasota ASALH (The Association for the Study of African American Life and History). Via an educational initiative with the Sarasota School System, four artists from the MUSE exhibition participated in local high schools and shared their talents with students. The goal was to inspire for youth to consider careers in the arts through learning about the achievements of African Americans. The SBAC website summarizes the Muse concept: "We are determined to create educational opportunities for students to learn about the arts of people of color which nourishes the examination of cultural norms."

SBAC will launch "Courageous Conversations"—an Arts and Racial Justice Panel Series—this month. It's a "first step to incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion in a broad community discussion where organization leaders from all the arts join our community and people representing the African American and Caribbean Diaspora ethnic and racial sectors. There is a continuum on the spectrum of racial justice and exploring this through our panel series would be helpful to the larger arts and cultural community."

The kickoff event is January 25 and its theme is the visual arts with moderator Charlayne Hunter-Gault. On March 1, the theme is performing arts with moderator Georgia Court. April 19's theme is media/literary again with moderator Charlayne Hunter-Gault and May 10's theme is higher education with moderator Dr. Denise Davis-Cotton. All panels will be free of charge and done via Zoom (<https://suncoastblackartscollaborative.org>).

As you can surmise by now, Michèle has the trifecta of activism: she's always creating; she's laser-focused; and she's skilled at collaboration. SBAC's partners to date include Florida Studio Theatre, Art Center Sarasota, the Hermitage Artist Retreat, Manasota ASALH, Sarasota Museum of Art, the Polk Museum, the Sarasota County school system and several educational groups and organizations—something she attributes to not just her own efforts, but that of her "dream team" of fellow SBAC members.

This month's SBAC's Arts and Racial Justice Panel series will offer the opportunity for "courageous conversations." She adds that, "Diversity is the first step in building a community. The key guiding principle behind SBAC and this series is that diversity is inherent in all aspects of life in the 21st century. SBAC advocates for the role of diversity, equity and inclusion in shaping the future of diverse and vibrant arts programming in the Suncoast community."

Personally, she adds, "I want people to listen to what these organizations have to say. We must be more inclusive - not just with programming. We need to engage." And as an important aside, adds, "The world is going to become more diverse. It's coming."

When not working, Michèle is making art, specifically ceramics. She prefers slab pottery, meaning just that: you roll clay, cut slabs and build objects that in turn will be fired and glazed. (micheleredwine.weebly.com).

Michèle's comments on race are elegantly simple: "We need to try a lot harder to imagine being a minority." She's creative in her ideas matched with high energy. With her heart she touches others and engages them to a shared cause. With her hands, she creates beautiful clay objects. She's a Renaissance woman. 🍷

STORY: Louise Bruderle

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