



Allen Cornell has been a “spark plug” in the engine of Riverside Theatre for more than 40 of its 50 years.

STEVEN MARTINE

PHILANTHROPY

Staying Power

A STRONG CURRENT DRIVES LONGTIME CHARITY LEADERS



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

Spark plug. Not the first impression I had of Allen Cornell, Riverside Theatre’s longtime producing artistic director and CEO. The setting was one of a series of welcome dinners hosted by late Indian River Community Foundation client Bob Theis, as I began my tenure as the organization’s

president and CEO in 2015.

While Bob’s intention was to introduce my wife, Stephanie, and me to several of the “movers and shakers” (as he called them) who led some of the most successful local nonprofit organizations, the quiet start to our meal had me thinking that I had misread the letter he had written me

describing whom we would be dining with. That is, until Stephanie asked Cornell about the performances scheduled for the upcoming season.

A light flickered in Cornell’s eyes. His posture shifted and his head tilted, focused and intense. He found his mark, thanked our host for the meal, and over the next hour



Christine Hobart, shown here with her friend PeanutButter, is the longtime executive director of McKee Botanical Garden.

proceeded to take Stephanie and me through chapter and verse of the carefully curated performances that would mark our first “season” as Vero Beach residents. It was showtime, and both Cornell and his supporting cast (i.e., Theis) earned a standing ovation.

Hal Williams, founder of the Rensselaerville Institute and veteran advisor to philanthropists and grantmaking foundations worldwide, says that human energy is the scarcest and most important resource for high achievement. It is just one of the characteristics he uses to define what he calls “spark plug leaders.”

Spark plug leaders have energy. They are action oriented. They focus on and achieve results. They take personal responsibility. They are team players.

After more than 40 years leading Riverside Theatre,

Allen Cornell has demonstrated mastery of each of these qualities and more, all of which were displayed prominently at Riverside’s recent 50th anniversary celebration. You do not have to look far, however, to find these same characteristics in many more nonprofit leaders in our community.

On my first visit to McKee Botanical Garden, Christine Hobart seemed like someone I might meet there. Not necessarily because of her personal appearance or style, but because of the way she fit perfectly into the serene natural beauty of this beloved place. She smiled, shook my hand, and then quietly led me on a walk through the 18-acre campus that is home to more than 10,000 native and tropical plants and one of Florida’s largest and most celebrated collections of water lilies.



The Community Foundation's Jeff Pickering and the Land Trust's Ken Grudens celebrate their collaboration at the beautiful Toni Robinson Waterfront Trail.



Jeff Pickering, Tatiana Wallace, and Crystal Bujol enjoy their partnership.

Hobart has worked at McKee for more than 25 years, 17 of which she has served as the organization's executive director. And while she demurs when praised for the nonprofit's success, the results speak for themselves. Like Cornell, Hobart also checks all the boxes for what it means to be a spark plug leader.

I believe that the prospect of being personally responsible for a place that holds the 100-year-old vision of local legends Arthur McKee and Waldo Sexton is a daunting obligation for anyone. In this beautiful natural environment, Hobart has been, well,

a natural—earning high praise from many, including another veteran leader of an environmental organization.

For almost two decades, Ken Grudens' energy and optimism have been making an impact by leading a local nonprofit with a powerfully simple purpose of protecting the land that protects the lagoon. The measurable results the Indian River Land Trust has achieved under Grudens' leadership are significant.

The Land Trust is responsible for conserving more than 1,200 acres of natural lands, including over 12 miles of Indian River Lagoon

shoreline. The names of the places that Grudens and his colleagues steward feel like warm salt air moving across a lush shoreline, reminiscent of a land to be remembered. Oyster Bar Marsh. Coastal Oaks Preserve. Cove Island. Bee Gum Point. Pine Island.

Grudens seems to eat, sleep, and breathe this work, mindful of the progress that has been made and restless with the next opportunity. Before his passing, longtime trustee and financial supporter Bill Buck told me he believed that Grudens had one of the most important jobs in our community. "Given the pristine nature



Jeff Pickering, right, presents a grant check to Ken Grudens.

of this land and the wide variety of animals and plants that depend on it, the stakes are very high," he said. "Yet he carries the weight of this responsibility with pride." High praise and an even higher standard that I am confident Grudens will continue to uphold.

Twenty years is a long time to lead any organization. In my opinion, Crystal Bujol deserves double the credit, considering that much of her tenure as founder leading the Gifford Youth Orchestra has been meted out in some of the squeakiest, off-key increments known to man—at least at the start, when her patience is tested while sitting through

lesson after lesson filled with the screeching sounds of a beginning violin student or the warbling tone of a new singer.

One look at the final performance of 11-year GYO student and recent Vero Beach High School graduate Tatiana Wallace makes it all worth it. In addition to becoming a virtuoso with a resume that includes dozens of volunteer performances to benefit numerous community organizations, Wallace learned leadership skills giving her the confidence to pursue college while continuing to teach violin to future GYO students.

Under Bujol's leadership, the GYO has developed into the premier nonprofit music education program in Indian River County. It is well positioned for greater impact as it begins a campaign to fund the construction of a permanent home on 45th Street in Gifford—a daunting task for many, but for Bujol, this challenge is music to her ears.

We live in one of the most generous communities in America. Whatever inspires you to give, donating to organizations led by people with "spark plug energy" is guaranteed to change the world. It is the only thing that ever will. ♡



Christine Hobart beams over a 2019 endowment grant from the Community Foundation.

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