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FEBRUARY 2026

Indian River Charter
High students give
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COUTURE**





The museum is designed to look as if it grew out of the gardens that will surround it.

COURTESY ALLIED WORKS © KVANTTI



DENISE RITCHIE, COURTESY VERO BEACH MUSEUM OF ART

PHILANTHROPY

Hard Hats & Hospitality

DONORS AND DIGNITARIES BRING STYLE AND OPTIMISM TO VBMA'S GROUNDBREAKING



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

The invitation read “Business attire with sensible shoes.” More like “construction site chic” is what I was thinking while sitting in the audience as Brady Roberts welcomed me, my son Grant, and roughly 200 other guests to the groundbreaking ceremony for the new Vero Beach Museum of Art. I donned a suit, and, despite having the

day off school, Grant was a good sport about wearing a collared shirt and pants for this special occasion.

It’s not easy to pull off wearing a hard hat and nice clothes. Board chair Rick Segal and campaign committee chair Emily Sherwood did it in style, completing their ensembles with golden shovel accessories befitting the occasion. Their

sartorial confidence may have been bolstered by the news that \$100 million had been raised from 112 donors during the quiet phase of Museum in the Garden: The Campaign for VBMA.

Quickly doing the math, Grant whispered an astonished guess that the donors must have given about \$1 million each. “Pretty close, buddy,”



Even though VBMA's gallery space will double, ample gardens and green spaces are at the heart of the overall design.

I answered as I watched him crane his neck to find familiar faces in the crowd.

Grant waved discreetly to VBMA past board chair Scott Alexander, who led the search committee when I was recruited as Indian River Community Foundation's CEO 10 years ago. He spotted VBMA past board chair Sandy Rolf and her husband, Randy, who have given Grant fond memories of visits to the annual Easter carnival at John's Island. He even spied Toni Hamner, a longtime VBMA volunteer docent who accompanies him on gallery tours and attends his theater performances.

It was neighbor and Vero Beach Mayor John Cotugno,

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however, who drew Grant's attention back toward the dais. I thought his remarks were among the finest a public official has ever delivered—full of wisdom and sophistication, and propitiously sentimental.

"This is a living symbol of what we can achieve if we all work together for a common good," Cotugno proclaimed. "We're not just building a museum. We are shaping the cultural heart of Vero Beach for generations to come."

I imagined our old friend,

was taking the responsibility to create a place where everyone would feel welcome, whether it be in hard hats, Hawaiian shirts, or haute couture.

Brad Cloepfl, founder of the project's architecture and design firm, Allied Works, is no stranger to construction sites. The Oregon native's key projects include museums in Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Canada; office buildings in New York; and a U.S. embassy in Mozambique. I was curious, however, about his under-



Grant and Jeff Pickering help celebrate the museum's big day.

Alma Lee Loy, patting Grant on the knee and mouthing those last few words to emphasize the importance of this moment: "for generations to come."

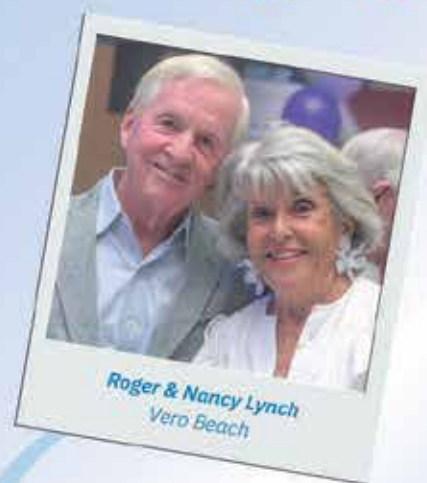
With an overall goal of \$126 million, this landmark initiative will support a new, expanded home and campus for VBMA which is scheduled to open in early 2028. "A place where the community can gather and enjoy creativity," Roberts promised. Amidst all the excitement, I was encouraged to hear how seriously he

standing of the unique location of the future museum and its natural setting. To be honest, at first I was a bit skeptical.

The smartly dressed Cloepfl drew me and the rest of the event's audience in with a reflection on his conception of this unprecedented undertaking: "I wanted it to be a garden first, which the museum kind of grows out of," he said—which is the key reason he chose landscape architect Claire Agre of Unknown Studio as a partner. She understands



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INDIAN RIVER INSIGHTS



COURTESY VERO BEACH MUSEUM OF ART

Heavy machinery stands by, ready to begin its work.

the precious connection the future museum will make between its visitors and the natural world.

Brad the Builder, meet Cloepfil the Conservationist. With a prescient vision like this one, I'll champion both.

As the program adjourned, a veritable who's who of dignitaries, donors, and special guests gathered for photographs behind a dirt mound with a bright yellow backhoe in the background. Each donned a hard hat and took a turn contributing to the ceremonial groundbreaking by lifting a golden shovel full of soil.

"Who made the biggest donation?" Grant asked as the program ended. "The lead gift was \$12 million, made by someone who prefers privacy," I told him. "In this town, some find it unfashionable to publicize that information. But I'll introduce you, if you would like?"

He demurred. Perhaps it was an unprompted act of reverence for the whole being

greater than the sum of its parts, but more likely a desire to make it to the snack table before the cookies ran out. Either way, I liked his style.

As the festivities wound down, Grant and I congratulated the VBMA staff on a successful event. I also thanked them for helping me and several other visually impaired people navigate the tent poles and folding chairs on our way in and out. While it could have been an oversight, their thoughtful decision to wear matching uniform golf shirts and name tags made for a more inclusive experience by identifying themselves for those needing assistance.

Needing a ride home, we flagged down Jim Carney, a past VBMA trustee and a grandfather of one of Grant's classmates, on his way to the valet. He was easy to find with his straw fedora rising above the crowd. He was glad to oblige.

We left the parking lot and drove through Riverside Park,

circling around past the current museum building.

“Forty years ago, Grant, I stood right over there for the groundbreaking of the first Vero Beach Museum of Art building,” Jim said, jutting his jaw in the direction of the fountain. “It changed our community for the better, and I think this new one will do the same. I won’t be around to see it, but it is so exciting that you will.”

Coco Chanel said, “You can never be overdressed or over-educated.” True for her then, and true for us as we fete the new VBMA for decades to come.

If time becomes a thief, however, he’d better show up dapper, bright, and wearing sensible shoes. 🌸



COURTESY ALLIED WORKS

In its new space, the Art Zone will continue to be an integral part of VBMA’s family appeal.

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