



# Creating the Audiences of Tomorrow

*Ali Bahaj and the Van Wezel Foundation* By Ryan G. Van Cleave | Photo by Nancy Guth

“Can you do me one small favor?” says Ali Bahaj during our lunchtime interview at Michael’s on East. “Make sure this piece focuses on the Van Wezel Foundation and all the good work they’re doing versus anything about me?” Long before the main course was served, it became clear that this was Bahaj’s way — helping and supporting others is job #1 these days in his “retirement.” The word amuses him since he confesses he’s as busy now as he ever was before. But he never once uses the word “work” because that doesn’t convey the sense of satisfaction and pleasure he gets from helping out Ringling College of Art + Design, the Ringling College Library Association, YMCA, Forty Carrots, and, of course, the Van Wezel Foundation. “That’s what’s great about this area. There’s no shortage of worthwhile groups to partner with,” he says. “You just have to find the one that interests you most.”

The Ethiopia-born Bahaj is a world traveler, having lived in 6 different countries with his wife Gloria and their two children thanks to his business work for a global company, including a 5-year stint in Japan as CEO of Caterpillar Japan. Now Bahaj’s business acumen is making a difference at the Van Wezel Foundation via his efforts as a Board Member and Treasurer. One thing he’s particularly proud of about the Foundation is how they are committed to exposing so many young people to arts and culture. “Last year alone, 25,000 students saw a live show for very little cost at the Van Wezel,” he says. “They’re the audiences of tomorrow. An investment like this is an investment in our future.”

Indeed, the mission of the Van Wezel Foundation is “to enrich lives of members of the Gulf Coast community, with an emphasis on children, through the performing arts while supporting the needs of the Van Wezel — the region’s premier performing arts hall.” Throughout the year, the Foundation brings an entire lineup of free or low-cost Schooltime Shows where busloads of area students can enjoy the firsthand experience of shows such as *Skippyjon Jones Snow What*, *Aesop Bops*, *Doctor Kaboom Live Wire: The Electricity Tour!*, and *The Improvised Shakespeare Company*. Plus there are Family Night events, where every paid adult ticket (in certain seating areas) comes with a free additional child ticket. My own kids are already counting the days until they can see *Cirque Mechanics Pedal Punk*, *Stomp*, and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. “I love how we get to meet the cast backstage after the show and ask questions,” says Valerie Van Cleave, my 11-year-old

daughter. “I never realized how much went into these shows until I heard the cast talk all about it. It’s amazing!”

Those are the sort of experiences Bahaj loves to hear about. He explains, “At the end of the day, it’s really about the legacy you’ve left for future generations.” And creating lifetime arts and culture lovers is truly about making a difference 10, 20, even 50 years from now.

Bahaj admits he won’t be a lifetime Board Member for the Van Wezel Foundation. “It only makes sense to be a member of a board if you bring value. Financial wisdom. Energy. Ideas. And you should have fun.” For now, he’s bringing a lot to the table and having a great time all the while. If that ever changes, it’s time to move on to the next challenge.

That next challenge, though, won’t involve relocation. While he’s lived all over and seemingly has traveled everywhere, Sarasota is where he’s staying. “I’ve only been here three years, but this is home. My family came here for the climate, the people, and the amazing arts and culture environment. We can’t get enough of it.” It’s exactly that type of enthusiasm that landed him on the Van Wezel Foundation board only one year after arriving here. He hasn’t regretted a single moment of his time spent there either. All of his anecdotes and experiences shine with optimism.

Even when the Key Lime Tart arrives (love that pecan-graham crust and cloud of baked meringue!), Bahaj continues finding good things to say about the Van Wezel Foundation. “The people who work there are terrific,” he says. “So impressive.” Mary Bensel, who is the Executive Director of the Van Wezel Hall and is responsible for its operations, sets the amazing lineup of shows. Monica Van Buskirk, the Foundation’s CEO and President who quietly does so much to make the Foundation effective. And the list goes on and on, even past when the Key Lime Tart is finally gone.

The one name he doesn’t mention? His own. He doesn’t seek acclaim or attention. “The Van Wezel — that iconic part of Sarasota — is what we should all be proud of and thankful for,” he concludes. “That’s where our attention should be.”

Well said, Ali Bahaj. Well said indeed. (Though it’s through the generosity of people like you that the Van Wezel Foundation can do things we’re all proud of and thankful for! And for that, we thank you.)

For more information on the Van Wezel Foundation, please visit [www.vwfoundation.org](http://www.vwfoundation.org) or call (941) 366-5578. 📍