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*Cheryl Mendelson
Photo by Nancy Guth*

B U I L D I N G

By Sue Cullen

If you had to pick one project in a booming Sarasota that has the potential to impact the entire Cultural Coast, it is the bayfront redevelopment initiative known as The Bay. At the heart of the 53-acre redevelopment project is the venerable 50-year-old Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall. That places Cheryl Mendelson, the new CEO of the Van Wezel Foundation, at the heart of plans to build a modern performing arts center as the The Bay's anchor.

Mendelson, who is a nonprofit executive with more than 25 years of experience across education, healthcare and the arts, came on board in February just as the first phase of the project was about to get off the ground after exhaustive community discussion for much of the current decade. And while construction of the performing arts center is planned for an unspecified future phase, raising the estimated \$250 million for building the center is an objective she has firmly in sight as she has taken the foundation's helm. That, of course, is in addition to keeping up with current philanthropic needs for programming, educational outreach and capital needs.

Challenging. But it is a challenge with which Mendelson is very familiar having been the key architect of a \$38 million capital, program and endowment campaign for Chicago's Harris Theater in Millennium Park, which has striking similarities with Sarasota's performing arts center project. "So much in my career mirrors the fantastic aspiration of the master plan and the civic and cultural vitality here in Sarasota," she says. "The Harris Theater was built to redevelop a forgotten part of downtown Chicago. The vision was to revitalize a public asset for the community into a thriving park near Lake Michigan. I was invited to help them think about how to build a future. It was a public/private partnership with the city of Chicago with the theater as anchor. I helped them build a vision with that project, and that made this position with the Van Wezel a natural fit for me."

Mendelson's career experience dovetails nicely with the Van Wezel Foundation's mission to "create a world-class performing arts center that enriches the community, supports arts education and inspires young minds." Having come on board in February, she has spent her first few months getting to know the community and its people along with establishing three key goals for the project.

The first goal is to make a new world-class performing arts center a reality to meet the community's desire for enjoying renowned performers and performances. The new center is envisioned to have 2,250 seats—about



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500 more than the current auditorium—an education center, enhanced acoustics and performance technology, and event spaces to support rentals. The need for a more modern facility to meet contemporary production needs was brought home recently with *The Lion King*, which ran in March. Mounting that production required 30 large trucks to offload mountains of costumes, scenery and equipment.

This goal is personally meaningful for Mendelson because performing arts were a family passion. Her mom loved to play piano and her dad was active in community theater. Saturday nights were often spent with friends singing show tunes around the piano. Mendelson and her sister tap danced on a Formica topped platform crafted for the occasion. “My childhood gave me the sense that music, theater and the arts help bring people together,” she says. “It was a strong moral direction for my family and helped shape who I am today.”

The second goal is to continue to grow the Van Wezel’s art education and community engagement programs, which provide performances for more than 30,000 students annually and bring the arts to families who may not be able to enjoy them otherwise. The programming



includes classroom support and arts integrated professional development for teachers. An experience with her now 18-year-old son gave Mendelson first-hand knowledge of the importance of classroom support for teachers.

“When he was in first grade, the class went to *The Nutcracker*, and when I asked him how the ballet was, he said ‘Mom, you’re not going to believe it. They didn’t say a word for two hours’,” she says. “Teachers need to be equipped to translate performances into meaningful ways that kids are learning and to be taught how to use it in math, STEAM and language arts.” Building on her background in human services, Mendelson also plans outreach to the area’s human services agencies to address psychosocial issues. “When you work with community partners and people attend performances as a family,” she says, “then it really starts to embed. But these programs only happen through philanthropic support.”

Mendelson describes her third goal as a civic-minded mission to ensure Sarasota continues to grow as a mecca for arts and culture along the Gulf Coast. “I’m not sure the broad community is aware of how impactful having an iconic new performing arts center can be and how it will influence the essence of Sarasota for generations to come,” she says. “It’s a legacy project that I hope everyone will embrace and want to get involved with.”