

STAR POWER

Mary Bensel & Monica Van Buskirk The REAL Van Wezel Stars

By Ryan C Van Cleave

Mary Bensel and Monica Van Buskirk have been working together to make the Van Wezel a knockout event space for five years. “Plenty of relationships don’t last that long!” Van Buskirk says with a laugh. She came to Sarasota in 1997 and by 2001, thanks to her dynamic personality and sincere love for the arts, she was invited to volunteer at the Van Wezel Foundation. Before long, she found herself on the Foundation Board. Since 2012, she’s been President and CEO of the Foundation, which means her efforts to secure community and financial support for the Van Wezel’s success are pretty much around-the-clock. Thanks to her and the Foundation’s efforts, they’ve directed millions of dollars in support of the hall’s capital improvements, programs and ongoing education efforts.

The two things that most people don’t understand are the Van Wezel Foundation and the Van Wezel are separate entities — the Foundation is a private non-profit foundation and the Van Wezel itself is owned by the city — and that the city is not subsidizing the Van Wezel. That’s why two of the Foundation’s goals are to find capital to support the Van Wezel and to help educate children. Both of these are clearly in line with their mission: “To enrich the 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.”

Van Buskirk comes from New York and has a background in the world of big companies such as Godiva Chocolatier where she served as vice president. She earned degrees in economics and marketing from Columbia University and CUNY Graduate School. “I’ve met many incredible female executives in my day, but Mary is something else,” she says about her work partner. “It’s incredible the deals she puts together. Getting Jay Leno here after his final show was such a coup!” Being part of the team that puts together such amazing shows is what keeps Van Buskirk going. She still remembers the first time she went to Lincoln Center, way up in the nosebleed seats, yet when the lights dimmed and the chandeliers went up, “I was mesmerized. It was breathtaking.” And that’s the same experience she hopes every audience member has at every Van Wezel show. “There aren’t really any bad seats in the house,” she adds, “so the experience is always quite intimate here.”

Don’t ask her about the possibility of her moving away from her work anytime soon. “Great things are happening on the Bayfront. I feel this is a legacy that I’m part of. I might be in a wheelchair or

something when it all comes together, but I’m going to stay around to see its transformation into a larger art area. It’ll be amazing.” She’s talking about the intersection of timing and opportunity, where buildings like the former G. Wiz are empty, and other spaces along the 42 acres from Boulevard of the Arts to Payne Terminal surrounding the Van Wezel are available to be repurposed. Bayfront 20:20 is the name of the community group developing this plan. The Van Wezel Foundation is an active participant in this group. The hope is to break ground sometime in the next few years. For exactly what? That’s not clear, but once the Van Wezel and Sarasota Orchestra finish their own planning efforts, Bayfront 20:20 will be partnering with the city, other businesses and other cultural organizations to create a waterfront arts area that will be the envy of the Gulf Coast.

Mary Bensel — Van Buskirk’s longtime collaborator and friend — is no stranger to the stage. Prior to becoming the Executive Director of the Van Wezel, she was Director of Touring and Sales at Troika, General Manager at the Barbara A. Mann Performing Arts Hall in Fort Myers, General Manager of the Merriam Theater in Philadelphia, and General Manager of the Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia. Add in a Bachelor’s degree from Mansfield University in Pennsylvania in Speech Theatre and Communications and a Master’s degree in Theatre from University of Pittsburgh, and it’s clear that she has theater in her blood. “I LOVE what I do,” she says from her office, which is down a flight of stairs and at the end of a hall from the Van Wezel’s main stage.

But Bensel knows how to make things happen both on and off the stage. “When I got here [in 2007],” she explains, “we were looking at a deficit of \$1.8 million. And this year? Finance is telling me we’re looking at \$1.3 million positive.” That turnaround is largely due to the top level of talent she’s been able to bring in. Jay Leno. Josh Groban. Sheryl Crowe. Sarah McLachlan. Jerry Seinfeld. Daryl Hall & John Oates. *The Book of Mormon*. The top-tier shows continue to come through Sarasota, drawing more and more people to the Van Wezel each season. “This is a highly competitive marketplace,” Bensel admits. “You wouldn’t believe the quality of offerings this community has!” Even so, the Van Wezel really sells itself. Van Buskirk adds, “We open up the sunset terrace and people have a cocktail out here and watch that beautiful sun go down.” Mary immediately agrees. “Nobody has the view we have!”

The pair of whiteboards behind Bensel in her office attest to the challenge of booking a full schedule of audience-drawing acts. There

