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A Passionate Life

Brenda Durant | Director Greater Augusta Arts Council

BY LUCY ADAMS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS THELEN



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Welcome to Arts Weekly, your guide to arts and entertainment in Augusta and the areas around it. I'm your host, Brenda Durant, with the Greater Augusta Arts Council, and for the next half hour, I'll pull back the curtain on arts, artists and the people who work hard to make your entertainment easy..."

That's the mellow voice of Brenda Durant, executive director of the Greater Augusta Arts Council, coming over the Smooth Jazz 92.3, WAEG-FM, airwaves on her half-hour Saturday morning radio show. To hear how comfortable she is in her role as show host—announcing upcoming events and future plans, interviewing guests—you would never guess that she describes herself as “very shy.” Even so, she's tough. She's resolute. Durant says of her introversion, “I made a decision to not let it hold me back. I fake [being outgoing] until it becomes real.”

Her dedication to the arts in Augusta and the CSRA, however, is no put on. Fourteen years with the Arts Council proves it. Durant has remained ever committed to the council's mission: to advance the arts and thus enrich the quality of life in Augusta and the Central Savannah River Area. “As for arts and culture,” she enthuses, “we've got it going on. The quality of arts professionals we have here is impressive.” Everyone, art appreciator and artist alike, seeks a niche in the community. An environment rich in variety and opportunity not only enables citizens to immerse themselves in their personal interests, it also opens avenues for stepping out of their cultural boxes. There's always something new to try.

Under Durant's direction, the Greater Augusta Arts Council coordinates, participates in, consults on and promotes several programs. The Arts in the Heart of Augusta Festival, First Friday, Wet Paint Party, Westobou Festival and Artscape Camp are but a sampling. The Arts Council also implements a contract with Fort Gordon to lead art camps on the base. Artists in all disciplines can access resources and workshops through the Arts Council to further their endeavors. Arts organizations rely on the council and Durant to give voice to their issues and concerns. In all aspects of shoring up the arts, she is vigilant, frequently volunteering at arts events, whether or not they are associated with the Arts Council. It's not unusual for her to check ticket sales on the websites of area venues. She desires success for all.

The seeds of Durant's dedication to the arts community formed at a very early age, though she is not an artist herself and makes no claim to any artistic talent. Over the years, she has dabbled in furniture painting and jewelry making. In high school she took ballet but faced the

unfortunate fact that her late start reduced her chance of entering a career as a professional dancer. She studied African drumming last year. Yet, despite owning three African drums and two guitars, she lightheartedly admits that between her and her husband, Edward, "Neither of us can play a blessed thing." Still, she's undaunted. She believes in trying things.

In the end, however, Durant says, "I'm a total appreciator," undoubtedly developing this mindset in her youth. Exposure to various artforms pervaded her childhood. Her uncle, Francesco Scavullo, was a famous portrait photographer who spent 20 years of his career working with top models in New York and taking cover photos for Cosmopolitan magazine. Classical music was played in her house all the time.

Discussions about books and poetry commonly occurred. Durant's mother and father performed in community theater productions and her mother wrote short stories and poems, which she read to Durant and her siblings. In the evenings, while her parents dined, Durant would offer to recite poems she memorized. She spent hours perusing and reading a set of art history books like they were novels. "I didn't realize I was living in a creative house," says Durant, who thought her childhood very similar to that of her peers.

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As an adult, however, she began to realize that many people hunger for cultural enrichment, for self-expression, for a romp with imagination, inspiration and inventiveness through music, dance, theater, literature and visual mediums. Advocacy for the arts is her way of ensuring the populace will be fed with what they hunger for. Her efforts extend beyond the boundaries of Augusta and the CSRA to the state and national levels.

Durant is the immediate past president of the Georgia Assembly of Community Arts Agencies (GACAA), a statewide organization committed to supporting and advancing the arts through education and advocacy. Through her involvement with GACAA, Durant has provided input on state and national bills relevant to arts funding and promotion. Two years ago she went to Arts Advocacy Day in Washington, D.C., as a representative from GACAA, where she participated in training sessions on federal arts policy and lobbying, as well as funding for National Endowment for the Arts. In addition, attendees talked with congressmen and women about the future of the arts in America.

Through her involvement with GACAA, Durant was also instrumental in generating a January 2011 resurrection of Georgia's Arts Day at the Capitol, a function that had fallen by the wayside in the late '90s. The affair coincided with Tourism Day and featured Georgia's First Lady, Sandra Deal, as the guest speaker. Visits to legislators' offices capped off the day. The 2011 Arts Day at the state capitol aided in facilitating the smooth reorganization of Georgia Council for the Arts under the Georgia Department of Economic Development. Durant, along with other GACAA members, guided the changeover to ensure that arts funding in Georgia would be protected.

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Nonetheless, arts advocacy, for Durant, isn't limited to the major newsworthy events. It's an everyday activity. Whether she's discussing tastes in entertainment with an acquaintance or sitting in on an advocacy conference call or working with Leadership Augusta, an organization with which she has remained active since she went through training in 1999, or sending a message on Capwiz, a website that enables organizations to effectively contact Congress and their state representatives to raise awareness of their causes, she keeps the advancement of the arts at the core of her communication. But she knows it's not enough to swoop in, ask for what she wants and swoop out. Durant explains, "You don't just talk to someone when you need something. You keep a relationship going." The power of personal transparency and genuine reciprocity goes a long way.



Staying on top of current trends and strategies is also essential to accomplishing the Greater Augusta Arts Council's mission. As a child, Durant climbed the learning curve via books, reading one a day. Every Saturday she checked out six books from the library, returning the completed six from the previous week. Still an avid reader, though now using a Kindle, she says, "My greatest pleasure is discovering an author for the first time and finding out that he or she has written more books." A desire for knowledge, a joy of learning, still burns. In her professional life, educational forums, like the books she loves, fuel her fire. Asking other experts for advice keeps her sharp. She is acutely aware that there's always more expertise to gain.

Unselfishly, she passes this knowledge on to others. An affiliation, founded on networking and transfer of information, with Columbia County Arts continues to expand for the advancement of the arts in the entire CSRA. Durant and her staff plan seminars to aid local artists with navigating the business side of the art world. As a member of the advisory boards for both the Imperial Theatre and the Westobou Festival, and in her various roles with Leadership Augusta over the years, she increases awareness of the current worries, primarily funding, artists and arts organizations face and commits herself to problem-solving. Never a one-woman show, Durant understands that walking the fine political line requires give and take. She invites colleagues to share feedback and she listens to ideas. This is what Durant calls a "community scan" for the purpose of encouraging conversation.

It's amazing that a person can maintain this high level of excitement and enthusiasm over an extended period. Part of what drives her is an intense love for Augusta. She grew to love the area's "easiness" after a rocky beginning. She had moved here from Great Neck, N.Y., as a high school senior when her parents opened a manufacturing plant in Waynesboro. She graduated from Aquinas High School, attended what was then Augusta College, married an Augusta boy, Edward Durant, and raised their three children here. Even before she was hired by the Arts Council, she coordinated volunteers to help with Augusta Ballet's annual Nutcracker performance, manned an Arts in the Heart booth for the Junior League, helped found the Opera Club and joined the Jazz Project board.

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Having once been a newcomer herself, she appreciates how the arts help people find an anchor. Along with moderate weather, a reasonable cost of living and negligible traffic, accessible and affordable entertainment and culture hook new residents. They find an outlet for their interest. They stay. They put down roots.

A sturdy, unified arts community reaches beyond the painters, beyond the sculptors, beyond the dancers, beyond the actors, beyond the writers. Everyone profits. “We become a cultured and educated populace,” says Durant. In tough times, local entertainment provides diversion from the troubles of the economy or the workplace. People can engage directly, hands-on, or as a part of an audience. Exposure to the arts sparks inspiration in children, who in turn embrace creativity. Seldom thought of, but equally as important, the arts spur economic development. “We bring reasons for people to buy clothes, put gas in their cars, eat in restaurants and stay in hotels,” says Durant. The arts are an essential component of the infrastructure of an energetic and growing city like Augusta.

Durant might be a self-proclaimed introverted bookworm, but she knows what she wants and she plans to go after it. On her wish list for the Greater Augusta Arts Council are an art gallery for local artists to display and sell their work, an art incubator to provide low cost work space for artists and funding for public art such as murals and sculptures. The public can join Durant in her goal of sustaining artists and arts organizations by attending their events. She also encourages residents to ask themselves which programs they would miss if those organizations or venues closed their doors. Ticket sales alone can’t finance these organizations. Consider making a donation of time or money.

But especially know that Durant, whether working behind the scenes to make things happen at the legislative level or heading up a group of volunteers to muster the muscle necessary to pull off a program, is not afraid of hard work or change. She lives off of the daily pings of happiness she receives from answering a question for someone, attracting a new corporate sponsor, overhearing Artscape teachers in a planning meeting or basking in the loyalty of long-term arts patrons. Like the high school senior she once was, forced by circumstance to adapt to the unknown, she accepts there will be good times and there will be bad times, but when the curtain is pulled back everything will come out alright in the end.

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