

Former College of Coastal Georgia president has new building job

Valerie Hepburn became executive director of Communities of Coastal Georgia Foundation this month

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Valerie Hepburn (right), former president of the College of Coastal Georgia, has moved on to be Communities of Coastal Georgia executive director with grant coordinator Ellen Post.

BRUNSWICK | It's easy to see the results of Valerie Hepburn's work. It's in the impressive new and renovated buildings on the campus of College of Coastal Georgia.

Her name, however, is in just a couple of places on college gates.

Those buildings stand partly because she was able to marshal the generosity of people who want the best for the community. Hepburn has moved on to a new building job with the Communities of Coastal Georgia Foundation, a relatively young organization that helps philanthropic donors find causes.

At the college, Hepburn had 200 acres at Fourth Street and Altama Avenue and a staff and a faculty. At the foundation, she and grant coordinator Ellen Post have a few rooms in the second floor of a St. Simons Island building.

Of her past work, Hepburn said, “Building a college can only go so far toward” building a healthy and prosperous community.

Hepburn notes the middle ground in Glynn County is relatively narrow. The county is home to some of the wealthiest people in Georgia — and the nation — while it still has a large number of poor and jobless residents.

“We’ve got the absolute best and some of the worst,” she said.

As she sees it, her job is to help the fortunate bring those on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale toward the middle.

“The biggest thing is harnessing all this incredible potential we have here to address all the issues we have in this county,” she said.

Not just Glynn County. The “Communities” now are Glynn, Camden and McIntosh counties and Hepburn expects that to extend inland.

Rees Sumerford, chairman of the foundation board, said the organization is fortunate that Hepburn was available to replace Lee Owens, the original director who retired.

“We’re proud of that,” Sumerford said of getting Hepburn as director. “She brings a lot of expertise, a lot of enthusiasm.”

Sumerford doesn’t talk about particular programs because that’s not what the foundation does.

“We just want to provide a vehicle for people to carry out philanthropy. We want to get the donors and donees together,” he said.

Not everyone can establish their own foundation and, as a longtime lawyer in one of Glynn County’s best firms, Sumerford knows how difficult that can be.

“There’s a lot of paperwork,” he said.

But not with the Communities Foundation as a sort of pass-through organization, Hepburn said.

Before passing any of the donations along, the foundation checks out the nonprofits to ensure “they’re delivering for our donors,” Hepburn said.

The foundation was established just under 10 years ago by about 65 families who saw the need for a safety net in the community should there be a natural disaster such as a hurricane or a terrible downturn in the economy.

It now has about \$13 million, and, given Hepburn’s success in fundraising at the college, that will assuredly grow.

Jim Bishop was an original member of the foundation board and was on the state Board of Regents when Hepburn turned what had been a two-year community college into a four-year state college.

Bishop said he is glad that Hepburn and her husband, David Hayes, like living here because there were certainly other opportunities open to Hepburn upon her retirement from the university system.

“This community is fortunate to have her back here,” Bishop said. “She can open any door that needs to be opened in this community. You give her an opportunity, you’d better watch out.”

Hepburn says that the foundation helped provide money to meet a critical need under Owens’ direction.

One of the initiatives that Owens ushered into place was an early reading program for infants to 5-year-olds that has spread into a number of areas. During the “well baby” visits, Glynn County Health Department staffers make sure that mothers are reading to their children and they give them books to get them started, Hepburn said.

The local Rotary Club works with day-care centers to read to children and kids get books to take home, she said.

The Glynn County school system has a grant for literacy on grade-appropriate reading and the Marshes of Glynn Library has taken over some of the early reading programs, she said.

Hepburn said teaching the very young to read is essential in helping the community thrive.

“If you can’t read by the time you enter first grade, you are behind forever,” she said.

But that’s just one mission accomplished, and Hepburn said there are others, it’s just a matter of identifying them and that means that going into its 10th year, the foundation should listen.

“We want to align [the foundation] closer with the business and nonprofit community to talk about the needs,” she said.

When Sumerford spoke of Hepburn's expertise, that becomes clear when she speaks of how money can be used as leverage.

"In my time as a bureaucrat, I've learned the philanthropic community can move the needle on things like nothing else," she said.

Bill and Melinda Gates also understand that, she said.

"I've watched governors embrace [programs to enhance] graduation rates just because the Gates Foundation will give them \$1 million. That's nothing in a state education budget, but they go for it," Hepburn said.

That's strategic philanthropy, the giving of enough to lay the groundwork that others will finish.

There are a number of buildings at College of Coastal Georgia with the names of generous people who gave a good portion of the costs.

So what's next for the foundation?

"We need to do a lot of listening, I think, for the next 90 days," Hepburn said.

Hepburn said she wants to align the foundation more closely with businesses and nonprofits to talk about their needs.

The community has more to offer than money, she said.

"We're a place people want to be. People come here to retire and can't sit still, people with incredible genius," she said.

"How do you bring the incredible genius and generosity to bear," on fostering the arts, cultural, historic and economic development, she asks. "A strong, healthy economy will help us as much as anything to attract and retain new talent. That's sort of what got me jazzed."