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Althemese Barnes and Marion McGee: Creating a Model for Succession Planning



In its own unique way, the John G. Riley House Museum is providing a revolutionary example for its peers. The museum was founded in 1996 by a committed group of individuals led by Mrs. Althemese Barnes and under her direction, the museum's reach and programs have expanded throughout the state—it is the home of the Florida African American Heritage Preservation Network, a professional association providing educational and technical assistance to preserve African American History and Culture. Though the Museum is small by reporting standards— with

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an annual visitation of about 10,000 people each year and roughly 2,400 square feet of space—its leaders recognized early that the potential for growth was exponential.

In 2005, the Museum was celebrating its ninth year and Mrs. Barnes had been working with the project, through restoration of the historic Riley House, for well over 20-years. She was ready to “see” the future and began a concerted effort to plan for her succession. The process took about three years, in which she sought the advice of board members, staff, and industry professionals. The need for a comprehensive transition plan was also cited in the organization’s Museum Assessment Program (MAP) review conducted by the American Association of Museums. The process included identifying the qualifications needed in a new director—educational background, work experience, and most importantly capacity for leadership.

Because of the Riley House Museums’ heavy involvement with governmental entities it would be important that the next leader of the Museum understand and be able to navigate Florida’s tricky political waters. The Museum found gold incarnate in Marion “Missy” McGee, an Arkansas native, and former Partnership Development Specialist with the U.S. Census Bureau. Missy’s love for community and passion for political action was evident even during her time as a student at Florida A&M University, receiving national attention during the 2000 election for leading protests in her role as President of the FAMU Chapter of the NAACP. Since that time, Missy has been appointed to various positions and formed close relationships with persons of influence locally, nationally and internationally. She had all of the criteria the succession documents had identified—and more. Missy was willing to learn.

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The Riley House struck a four-year deal with Missy, thanks to funding received from the Institute of Museum & Library Services (IMLS) that supports the succession planning efforts of the Riley Museum. In which time, she would join the staff as the Assistant to the Director, then, serve as Assistant Director for the next two years and Executive Director at the end of the forth-year. As a part of her executive apprenticeship, Missy began by shadowing Mrs. Barnes, taking on more day-to-day responsibilities and further cultivating her leadership skills. As the roles and needs of the museum became clearer to her, Missy has been encouraged to develop her own leadership style through hands-on training opportunities that include: coalition and collaborative partnership building, marketing, technology enhancement, improved communications systems, event planning and implementation, research, product development and direct support of the statewide network of museums— the Florida African American Heritage Preservation Network (FAAHPN) which continues to function as a very active professional association of African American led museums throughout the State.

The use of a forward-thinking succession plan has allowed the heir-apparent to work effectively alongside the Founding Executive Director, Mrs. Althemese Barnes, the museum board of directors and the staff to establish a vision for the future of the organization, in a careful considerate way— where all are learning from each other.

“True success comes only when every generation continues to develop the next generation.”

— [John C. Maxwell](#)