

# BUSINESS PROFILE

## New Alliance director in it for the challenge

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It was a cold day in 1979 when Gary Conley decided to move to Fort Myers from his hometown, Kansas City, Mo. Then, he was a young marketing specialist for United Telephone Company. The company wanted him in Florida and he moved, for among other reasons, because nothing was tying him down.

"I was single at the time," Conley said. "And actually on the day that they had offered me this transfer I looked out my office window at the Kansas City International Airport and snow was blowing literally horizontally across the windows and they said 'Would you like to move to Florida?' and I said 'Yes, I would.'"

A few months ago Conley, 59, said yes to another opportunity, as Executive Director of the Alliance for the Arts in Lee County. He came to the umbrella arts organization after being picked from over 100 candidates. Conley was chosen by the Alliance board of directors for the \$55,000 per year position in part for his business and financial acumen and history of involvement with local not-for-profits.

Besides working for the United Telephone, Conley also started his own eco-friendly cleaning and maintenance service in Lee County, before retiring for a short time in his early 40s. Later he worked for Prudential Financial and later A.G. Edwards. But Conley chose this position for different reasons.

"I'm not working here for the money," he said. "I'm working here because there are challenges to be met. And I wanna do something that I feel good about."

One of his most passionate agendas is

getting at-risk or underprivileged children involved in arts and culture through the Alliance.

"If you exposed those at risk children to any form of arts and culture you have reduced their risk by a considerable percentage," he said.

With no children of his own, Conley especially enjoyed visiting children at the Immokalee Child Care Center, where he still sits on the board, after serving as President for four years. He hopes one of his legacies will be a saving a few children with the Arts.

"Maybe at some time in the future," Conley said, "wherever I go, if I meet up with any of those souls, maybe they'll tell me then, 'You know what? It was the Alliance of the Arts that got me interested in playing the piano that changed my life. I didn't become a drug dealer, I became a concert pianist and I entertained millions of people and I helped hundreds of kids learn how to play the piano and I'm very much appreciative of you and your organization for doing that.'"

Another challenge Conley is undertaking will be to make the Alliance, founded in 1974, a Lee County landmark. The aging William R. Frizzell Cultural Centre building needs a new paint job, which it will soon get, Conley said, in terra cotta, golden rod, moss green and steel blue. There will be new lights; a new welcome sign.

He also has plans for the entire 11-acre campus. Conley described his practical dream for the space: "A lot of it is just vacant land. I see that being a beautifully landscaped area of walkways and gardens and water features and outdoor sculptures and things that people

in the community can use. Because right now the only people that use that land - and we certainly don't begrudge them - is the kids from the YMCA come over and play football occasionally. But I'd like to see people walking their dogs and sitting under the big shade trees and reading books."

Conley said that even though most people in Lee County are familiar with the intersection of Colonial Boulevard and McGregor Boulevard, many are not even aware the Alliance sits there, with its museum of intriguing local artworks, classrooms and the Foulds Theatre.

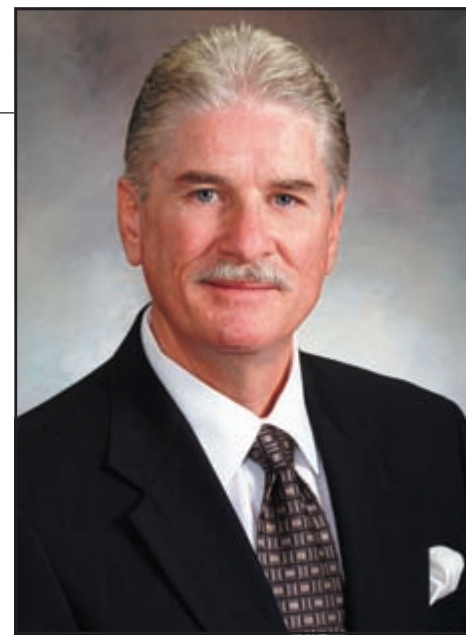
"We're going to make this campus such a beautiful part of Fort Myers that it's gonna become a landmark," he said. "That's the easy part; the hard part is going to be to provide the services that we admittedly have been lax in providing in the past."

That means more collaborations with other art and cultural centers in Lee County such as the Sidney and Berne Davis Art Center in downtown Fort Myers, the Harlem Heights Cultural Center in South Lee County and the Art League of Bonita Springs - as well as local artists, whoever they may be.

Conley said he feels blessed to be in a position to work with the arts now, to get to fulfill that desire.

"I'm a frustrated artist in many ways," Conley said. "I've tried my hand at music - I'm not good at that. At painting - I'm not very good at that. Probably the biggest artistic ability I have is culinary. I'm a pretty damn good cook."

One of his favorite things to make is chili. "I do like to cook chili," he admitted. "If you sat down and had a bowl of my chili today



Gary Conley

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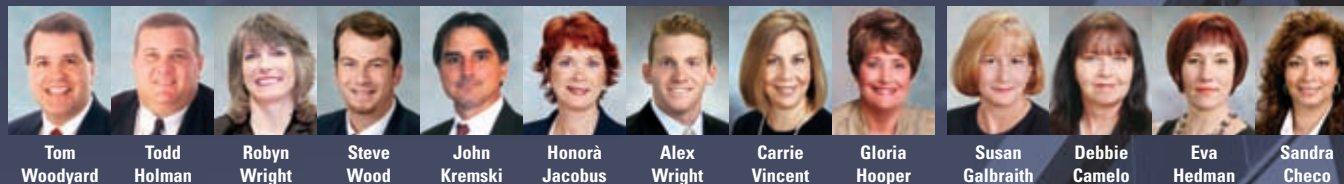
and a bowl of chili I cooked tomorrow they wouldn't taste anything alike...I wanna create something every time I do this."

It's a dish for cold weather, but the only time Conley sees that now is when he goes to New York for Christmas with his wife Karen once a year. They live in North Naples. As for Kansas City, the one Conley knew - he graduated from Raytown High School in 1967 - it's mostly in his memories.

"I've been back on just a couple of occasions," he said. "And I think that I demonstrated in a real way that you can never go home again. Because it wasn't home anymore, it wasn't the same. There were still landmarks. I mean, the Plaza was still there. I used to love to go down to the plaza, to Winstead's. And there were some drive-in restaurants that we used to hang around as kids down there. All that's still there but it didn't have the same feeling, it wasn't home anymore. This is home now." ■

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