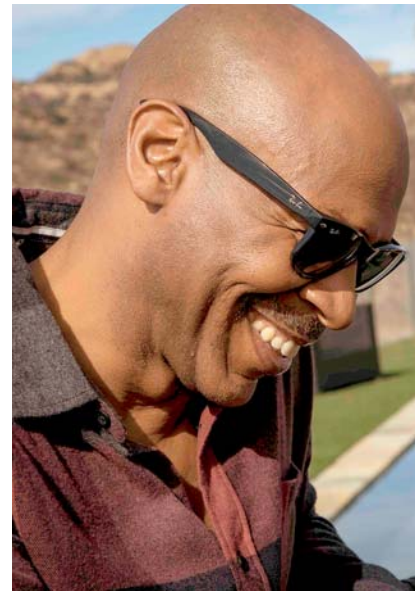


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THE WEEK OF MAY 18 - 25, 2017

Avis Anderson

THE FIXER

AVIS ANDERSON is a fixer.

No, not the kind of fixer that lawyers hire who use legal loopholes to get a bad-guy client off, like George Clooney in "Michael Clayton."

She's a fixer of people and nonprofit groups.

She uses her vast network of contacts, connections and knowledge to do good things as the executive director of the Monmouth Museum and as co-chair of the annual Twilight Concert at St. George's By The River in Rumson which raises money for the AIDS Resource Foundation for Children – \$600,000 since the first concert in 1997.

"One word to describe her – dynamo. She makes things happen," said Daniel J. Fenski, chairman of the board of trustees at the museum and the owner of Windsor Gallery in Colts Neck. "She's a very tenacious person, but she has to be."

"She's a doer," said Stan Cain, an art director, who met her in 1989 and they've been a couple ever since. "She knows so many actors and musicians, and how to do community outreach.

"She knew that if you asked musicians to donate their time on a Saturday, you need to plan a twilight gig that gets them out in time to make their night paying gig."

For Sandy Johanson, who has known Anderson longer than she can remember, she fixed her anxiety at a critical time.

Johanson, who works in Brookdale Community College's photography department, was meeting a curator from the Museum of Arts and Design in Manhattan hoping some pieces of jewelry she made would be accepted for exhibition. The museum collects, displays, and interprets objects that document contemporary and historic innovation in craft, art, and design.

"It was the chance of a lifetime," she said. "I never dreamed something I made would be in a museum. She noticed I was very nervous about the meeting.

"So she offered to go with me, and that took some of the weight off," Johanson said. "She's very supportive. You can depend on her."

The museum accepted two of Johanson's pieces.

"But it was a wonderful, fun time to be there because of all these young and creative people. I made lifelong friends there that I still see."

During an interview in her windowless attic office within the museum, tucked in the back of the Brookdale campus off Newman Springs Road – during which she laughed often – the self-effacing Anderson starts by proudly calling herself a clamdigger.

She grew up in Neptune and spent summers at her grandmother's house a few blocks from the ocean in Bradley Beach. She graduated Neptune High School and earned a degree in psychology from Monmouth University in 1974.

"I loved growing up here. Loved the beach. Loved going to Asbury Park. And I love how it's coming back," she said. "It's a happening place. So much so, I can't find a place to park there on a Saturday night."

She previously worked for the Monmouth County Parks System in cultural services creating a children's theater program, art classes and exhibits, booking bus trips to Broadway shows.

She moved on to the Monmouth County Arts Council during the time it owned and operated the Count Basie Theater in Red Bank.

"Ed Garcia was the director then and we had a small staff that ran the theater," she said. "Whatever your job title was, you had 12 other things to do.

"We had to raise money, book a whole performing arts series, and we ran movies regularly," she said. "I remember we did a run of 'Animal House' that nearly wrecked the place.

"But it was a wonderful, fun time to be there because of all these young and creative people. I made lifelong friends there that I still see."

She's been running the 54-year-old Monmouth Museum for 11 years. It's one of the county's best-kept secrets, she said, adding she meets people all the time who don't know the museum. It's not on a main road with lots of traffic and signs. Its name

leads people to think it's a county museum or, due to location, a community college museum.

"It's not high tech with lots of flashy things whizzing by, which is expensive," Anderson said.

Its mission is to promote art, science and history. It has no collection of its own. It rotates 10 or so exhibits each year through the Main Gallery and Nilson Gallery. The Becker Wing is a hands-on learning environment for children age 7 to 12 years with changing exhibits. The WonderWing is for younger children to stimulate curiosity, understanding, and to explore and discover.

The museum has four-and-a-half employees (two share a job) and an annual budget of \$550,000. It's considered a regional museum, which enables it to apply for state funding. It received \$23,750 this fiscal year from the New Jersey State Council on the arts and \$33,000 from the Monmouth County Freeholders, an amount that has been declining each year.

The number of social charities in the area has escalated over the years as the amount of public dollars shrank, Anderson said.

"When the government says it's not going to fund something the message sent is it is not important," she said. "It's subliminal, but people then think 'Why should I donate?' We just don't get the heavy hitters who will write a \$10,000 check every year.

"One thing we suffer from is our own success – being around

so long. Sometimes it hurts us. People want to give to the new guy starting out. That's a hurdle," she said.

Currently, the museum has about 1,200 members and averages about 1,000 visitors a year. A juried art show in January attracted international artists from Russia, Israel and Italy. The influx of New Yorkers moving to Asbury Park is bringing in new people. A mom's club meets Fridays and the children can play and create projects.

"The Magic of Sharks" is scheduled for Aug. 4. Bus trips and artist talks are planned for adults.

Being a small museum does have advantages, Anderson said.

When 20 clients and nine aides from a group with intellectual and developmental disabilities recently walked in without advance notice asking if they could have a tour of the art galleries, they were accommodated.

"These are the kinds of things we can do because we are small. My staff rallied. They came up with a project, set up tables, and everyone made something and talked about art.

"As they (the group's clients) get older, there are less things for them to do," she said. "That's what we can do and we really want to try to accommodate everyone."

BY GRETCHEN C. VAN BENTHUYSEN

DANNY SANCHEZ

