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**Contact:** [dds@drewsawyer.biz](mailto:dds@drewsawyer.biz); 240 535-4432; [www.DonnaDrewSawyer.com](http://www.DonnaDrewSawyer.com)

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# New ASC President Harriet Sanford

## Adds Diversity To Charlotte's Cultural Fabric

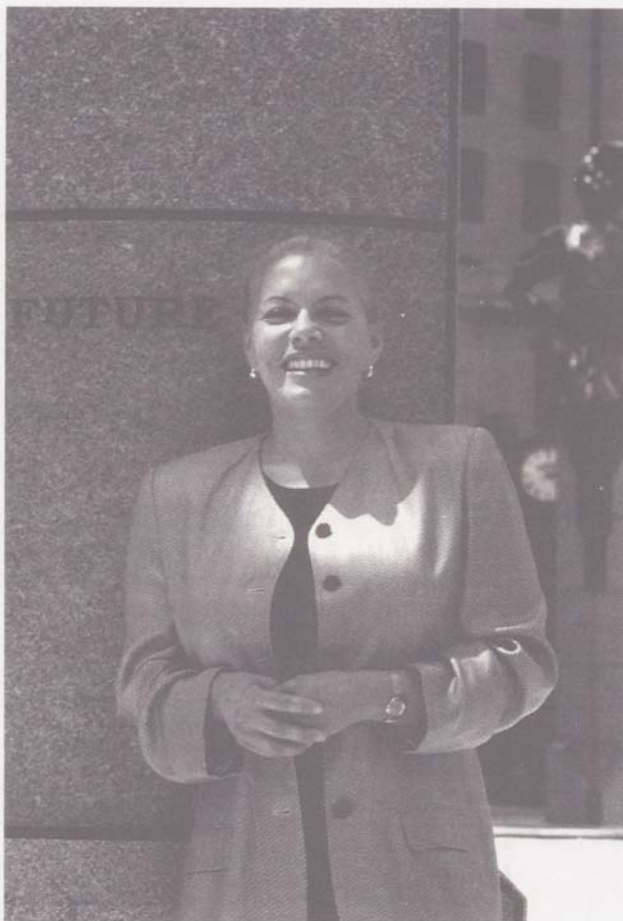
by Donna Drew Sawyer

**H**arriet Sanford is not at all what one would expect. As the new president of Charlotte's Arts & Science Council (ASC), one could easily assume that she would either be very corporate in her demeanor, or someone from the white-gloved set — after all, that is the prevalent image of anyone involved with the arts, right? Not in Sanford's case.

She's warm, open, casual and absolutely passionate about art and the significant role it plays in a community. She will personally and professionally dispel any preconceived notions anyone may have about the arts being for and about certain people.

Sanford is proudly biracial, dismantling the stereotypical image of people who promote and preserve the arts. She's well connected to every aspect, whether it's folk art, contemporary drama, opera, art exhibitions or movies. She prefers participation in — not just administration of — community-based arts programs for at-risk youth. She is as impressed with the fact that the ASC is proudly supported by a couple of sales people at a local department store as she is with donations from large corporate underwriters. She thinks teaching her 5-year-old daughter Averi to roller skate, as her own father taught her, is a priority. And she doesn't pass up the opportunity to proudly let you know she is a triathlete.

Sanford began her career in arts in 1986 as the director of the Bureau of Cultural Affairs for the City of Atlanta after serving in several management positions there. Nay sayers felt the appointment should have gone to an artist or someone with a creative background instead of someone with a master's degree in public administration. "I would tell them, 'You can't write, you can't raise money, you can't manage — you need me!'" she says.



Harriet Sanford, president of the Arts & Science Council, sees her mission as reconnecting the ASC to the community.

Sanford led the bureau successfully until she was tapped to be the director of the Fulton County Department of Arts and Culture, Georgia's largest publicly funded cultural agency. Even though her tenure included a legion of achievements and awards, she always felt the arts were

not an integral part of the public agenda in Atlanta.

Sanford had been watching the emerging art scene in Charlotte long before the ASC began a national search for a president last year.

"I had known Michael Marsicano

[former president of the ASC] for 10 years," she says. "We had exchanged ideas. I knew the ASC was unique. You can't be in my business in arts administration and not know about Charlotte and the ASC. This organization did not function like a typical united arts fund because they did not allocate on a formula basis. They put controls and conditions on grants. That's pretty unheard of — and the ASC was instrumental in creating a serious cultural landscape in the city of Charlotte. But I can't say that when I heard Michael was leaving that this job was not on my radar screen."

The ASC had its eyes on Sanford, too. When she came to interview last December, Sanford was ready. "I really prepared myself," she says. "I spent about a week, and I looked at their plan for the future. I looked at the print material and the Web site and I critiqued the good and the bad. In my typical fashion I was candid. I said, 'Here's what I see. This is what is wonderful and this is what you need to work on.'"

"I told them, 'I don't know whether you'll invite me back, but these are some things I have to share because I have to come into a situation uncompromised.' I figured they would either be polite and never call me again, or I would make it back — and I did."

### Sanford's Mission

Sanford sees her mission as extending or reconnecting the ASC to the community. "Michael's mission was to build the ASC as an institution. What he did worked for that moment," she explains. "However, we are in an evolutionary stage of this institution, where it is not as much about building as it is about extending the multidimensional role of the ASC to all facets of the community."

"When the ASC embraces the history and heritage institutions," she continues, "our role is that of contributing to preservation. Our support on a day-to-day

Photo by Donna Biss

basis of the performing and visual arts affiliates is capturing whatever is happening now because most of those institutions tend to be more contemporary.

“What is art but capturing the sound, the voices, the words, the visuals of the moment? So the ASC helps with the advancement and the development of whatever is happening at a given moment. As Charlotte continues to define and redefine itself, one of the things we hope to do is to keep the role that culture plays in the forefront of that development. Not in the typical bricks and mortar sense of development, but how we develop as a community.”

One of the things that guides community development, Sanford says, is diversity—in all of its dimensions. She wants people to understand that diversity is more than just race, it includes a diversity in the arts, and an appreciation of all the forms art takes: the performing arts, fine arts, crafts, as well as emerging and established artists. It’s about the diversity

of culture, community, age, race, class and gender.

It includes the diverse opportunities that are available for the ASC to get involved in education, funding and economic development.

It is nurturing new artists, and extending the scope of Charlotte through the artists and artisans who move from Charlotte to other cities, national and international. All of these diverse elements are interwoven into the cultural fabric of Charlotte. “This is something the ASC identified in their own plan, and it is something that is at the core of my being,” Sanford says. “You have to have someone who is willing to talk about it out loud, advance it and promote it.”

Sanford believes that in order to promote the ASC agenda, the organization has to extend itself to the community at large. The ASC has to extend a respectful and sincere welcome and seek the participation of individuals and groups that may or may not currently have a relationship with the ASC or the arts community. “I have talked with people who don’t feel connected,” she says. “I have talked to groups that have never felt they had access. I think one of the

things people will see is not so much our rhetoric but our behavior. I plan to knock on and help to open a lot of doors.”

### **Welcome To Charlotte**

From day one in Charlotte, Sanford said she has felt welcome here. She was pleasantly surprised by the down to earth nature of Charlotteans, as well as their commitment to culture, art and science. Coming to Charlotte was easier professionally than it was personally, however, because it meant leaving close friends and family. “It was not like I had experienced [living in Charlotte] and said I have to have it,” she explains. “It was a burden of faith and trust.”

For Sanford’s husband, Mark Lassiter, it meant leaving his advertising firm. “The challenge then became with my husband,” she says. Lassiter is currently exploring whether he will move his business to Charlotte or join a local firm.

Because the Sanford-Lassiter family enjoys art as recreation as well as vocation, they integrate family activities

into the openings and performances that require Sanford’s attendance. Travel is one of the family’s passions, with the local museum always the first

stop on every itinerary. Averis is already a seasoned traveler, with South Africa and three visits to the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival under her belt.

During our interview one of the first things Sanford said was that she has to have contact with people and art. She wants to get to know an artist, to see the work being created from the very beginning. The second thing she said was that she appreciated the arts because she has no artistic talent. I think she was wrong in that assessment. Sanford’s talent lies in her ability to find a way for all of us to have contact with people and art, to get to know artists, and to see them at work. It will be fascinating for all of us to watch as Sanford begins to perform her artistry at the Arts and Science Council. **TCW**

—Donna Drew Sawyer is a writer in Charlotte, formerly the director of marketing for the North Carolina Blumenthal Performing Arts Center.

*“What is art but capturing the sound, the voices, the words, the visuals of the moment?”*

—Harriet Sanford, ASC president