

Sarasota Magazine

NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

Four New Arts Leaders Shaping Our Future

All of them are charged up to enhance our cultural landscape.

By [Kay Kipling](#) November 13, 2022 Published in the [November-December 2022](#) issue of *Sarasota Magazine*



Benny Sato Ambush

IMAGE: [BARBARA BANKS](#)

Sarasota has changed in more ways than one over the past couple of years. Not only have [new condos](#) and homes sprung up everywhere, but new faces and voices are emerging on the arts scene, as well.

Some [longstanding leaders are retiring](#)—meaning more fresh arrivals will be on the way soon—while some organizations have created new or reimagined positions because they have grown. And some change is just natural turnover. Whatever the reason, there are

many people to meet in the arts world, and here are four, all of them relatively new to their roles and charged up to enhance our cultural landscape.

Benny Sato Ambush

Artistic Director, [Venice Theatre](#)

BEFORE COMING HERE: Ambush, pictured at top, has had a long career working in professional theater around the country, including stints as artistic director with Theatre Virginia and the Oakland Ensemble Theatre. His new role at Venice Theatre was complicated by Hurricane Ian, which severely damaged the theater's largest performance space. As of press time, the theater had not yet announced how, or if, it would continue with its current season.

WHY HE CAME TO VENICE: "I came because the theater asked me. I had been here as an adjudicator during the acctWorldFest in 2014, and I returned for it in 2018. I got to know the leadership and to witness for myself the amazing connection audiences have with this theater."

WHAT VENICE THEATRE DOES: "One of the remarkable things about the theater is that it's managed professionally, like a League of Resident Theatres theater. And its budget size makes it the second largest community theater in the country. It provides opportunities for theater makers, not only to act, but to work in stage managing, costumes, sets and administrative areas. We do a huge amount of work here: 16 full-run plays and musicals, plus two dozen other shows and concerts. It's a juggernaut."

WHAT HE'S WORKING ON: "Helping to form a more structured and comprehensive training program in acting and helping to chart the next quarter century. This job uses all parts of me, as an arts leader, director, producer, educator and public face. I'm living my best life right now."

WHAT HE DOES WHEN NOT WORKING: "Enjoy the beach. I'm originally from Massachusetts, and here it's actually warm enough to swim. I also enjoy the natural beauty, the Key lime pie, getting to know my new neighbors. And I have a convertible, so I'm using that."



Kinsey Robb

IMAGE: [BARBARA BANKS](#)

Kinsey Robb

Executive Director, [Art Center Sarasota](#)

BEFORE COMING HERE: Robb earned a master's degree in art history in England before moving to New York City to work in several blue-chip galleries.

WHY SHE CAME TO SARASOTA: "I knew the area because my grandparents moved to Longboat Key in the late 1970s, and my parents now have a home here, as well. I got to experience the city and its arts and having an opportunity to work with a nonprofit art center here seemed a welcome challenge in many ways."

WHAT SHE LIKES ABOUT HER JOB: "Art Center Sarasota is an organization that's been around nearly 100 years. It's a wonderful gem that's been overlooked a little bit. I was drawn to its history, and I see it as somewhere for the community to gather."

WHAT THE CENTER DOES: "We have four gallery spaces selling local and regional art, and we have a robust education program taught by trained artists. This past year, we've accomplished quite a bit. We renovated the Atrium Gallery and we've been able to champion other nonprofits that align with our vision, like Sunshine From Darkness [a Sarasota nonprofit that funds mental health and addiction assistance services], by hosting panels and discussions here."

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS: "With 53 acres along the bayfront, and the new Bay Park, we all benefit. We could definitely do even more than we're doing if we had more space. I hope to expand our existing building or have a new one eventually."

WHAT SHE DOES WHEN NOT WORKING: More working. "I like being able to meet with other leaders and talk about ideas, and people here make the time to do that.

Sarasota's size hits a sweet spot where you're able to make an impact."



Virginia Shearer

IMAGE: [BARBARA BANKS](#)

Virginia Shearer

Executive Director, [Sarasota Art Museum of Ringling College of Art and Design](#)

BEFORE COMING HERE: Most recently, Shearer was director of education at Atlanta's High Museum of Art. Before that, she worked in education at the Tampa Museum of Art and, before that, at The Ringling.

WHY SHE CAME BACK TO SARASOTA: "I worked at the High for over 16 years and had reached the point where there was no place to go in that organization anymore. It was time for me to move to a different level of leadership. And I loved the chutzpah here of, 'We're going to build a museum for modern and contemporary art.' I could imagine the project and the community, and when I actually came here, I was blown away."

WHAT'S CHANGED SINCE SHE WAS HERE BEFORE: "Sarasota is more built up, for sure. But what's interesting is that when I was here before, as a younger person out of graduate school, I felt a bit of an outlier in the community. Now a lot of younger people are working here in the arts, people with energy and ideas. It feels like a great place to be."

WHAT SHE'S WORKING ON: "Defining the institution and its programming is incredibly important because modern and contemporary art can be a lot of things. I'm really focused on bringing great art and artists to Sarasota. We are going to have a more robust changing exhibition schedule. I'm working three years out on it."

WHAT SHE AND HER FAMILY ENJOY HERE: "All the beauty, the trees, the plants. I ride my bike. We go to the beach. And for a good busman's holiday, I go to Selby Gardens."



Sheila McKoy

IMAGE: [BARBARA BANKS](#)

Sheila McKoy

Exhibition Director, [Embracing Our Differences](#)

BEFORE COMING HERE: McKoy shepherded more than 150 art projects within the New Jersey transit system, including mosaics, sculptures and other installations.

WHY SHE CAME TO SARASOTA: “I retired in 2015, and my husband and I started looking for a new home. I had a colleague who had been coming here since the 1960s, and he said, ‘Come stay with me in Sarasota,’ before deciding. We saw his home on Siesta Key and said, ‘We can do this!’ We have not regretted it a day since.”

HOW SHE GOT INVOLVED WITH EMBRACING OUR DIFFERENCES: “I started off as a juror for the exhibition and was able to do that for three years. This year, for the 20th show, they reached out to me for this brand-new role because we are expanding it into three communities. Besides Bayfront Park, the show will also travel to North Port’s Butler Park and Bradenton’s State College of Florida campus. I love the work they do, and it’s needed more than ever.”

WHAT SHE’S WORKING ON: “Last year, we received 17,000 submissions for the show. We narrow those submissions down to 500 to 1,000 for the jurors. In selecting the jurors, we are probably more diverse than it’s been in the past few years. I’m also learning so much about the educational component of it all. The curriculum in the schools is amazing.”

FUTURE GOALS: “I would love to see us go up to St. Petersburg and connect to have the exhibit there, too.”

WHAT SHE DOES WHEN NOT WORKING: “I play a lot of games. I belong to a book club. I’m active in my church. And I love the beach here. We can swim whenever we want.”