

BUSINESS

National Ms. Foundation among chorus praising Ruby Bright's career

By [Jane Roberts](#), Daily Memphian

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Ruby Bright has a quiet moment in front of the statue of Ida B. Wells at its unveiling on July 16, 2021, at Fourth and Beale in Memphis. (Patrick Lantrip/Daily Memphian file)

In 22 years, Ruby Bright has taken the Women's Foundation for a Greater Memphis from an organization that

could raise \$60,000 a year to more than twice that a month.

And in her can-do style, she also showed the universe of people who fund women's causes the power of public-private partnerships for moving the needle.

She learned that in the trenches here, starting in the early 2000s, when the City of Memphis won tens of millions in federal Hope VI dollars to tear down tract after tract of dilapidated public housing and needed a philanthropist to fund care for scores of residents in poverty facing complicated transitions.



Ruby Bright is retiring as president and CEO of the Women's Foundation for a Greater Memphis.

(Submitted)

College Park, Uptown transition to affordable housing program begins

Bright, 69, retiring at the end of the year, raised her hand. For that and sharing what she has learned over two decades with the global Women's Funding Network and others, the Ms. Foundation will honor her as one of four recipients of its Women of Vision Award on May 17 in New York.

The other recipients are Cassandra Overton Welchlin, executive director and co-convenor of Mississippi Black Women's Roundtable; Bozoma Saint John, entrepreneur; and U.S. Rep. Maxine Waters (D-California).

"As I look humbly at this body of work and the role we played for women and children in our community, we've elevated women's leadership, we've deepened our commitment to the community, and we've maintained our commitment to the mission through our investments," Bright said.

Philanthropist Mertie Buckman started what became the Women's Foundation in 1995 with 10 women she personally invited to invest in the lives of women and children in Memphis.

When Bright became executive director in 2000, she expanded the circle. Last week, 1,000 people paid to attend the foundation's annual Tribute Luncheon. It was sold out.

It also was the first of its kind to partner with government agencies to administer American Rescue Plan Act funds during the pandemic.

And it is the only Women's Foundation in the nation to receive an award from a Secretary of Housing and Urban Development for the scope and efficiency of its public-private partnerships.

"Women's funders across the world play a lot of different roles," said Elizabeth Barajas-Roman, president/CEO of the Women's Funding Network in San Francisco. "They often do policy, advocacy and some do direct service.

"What Ruby pioneered in Memphis is really all of the different levers, including government," Barajas-Roman said. "She played a pioneering role in working with government to work on projects that directly impact women and children."

She did a similar thing in the pandemic by getting food and supplies to families in need by partnering with government funders.

"It was so inspiring that we immediately moved to do that work," Barajas-Roman said.

"Her impact really does extend beyond greater Memphis — Maine, Colorado, Arkansas, Minnesota — would not be able to do what they did if they had not had that kind of connection with Ruby Bright," she said. "The connection really goes far afield where her impact has happened."

The starting point was around 2003 when Memphis won a series of federal grants, part of U.S. Housing and Urban Development's plan to demolish the worst public

housing projects in the nation.

The first was \$22 million to raze and rebuild Lamar Terrace, on the southwest corner of E.H. Crump and Interstate 240. The funding included nothing to help the dislocated.

“We were asked to help identify a philanthropic partner,” Bright said. “Gayle Rose was the board chairman at the time. She said, ‘We should do that,’ which was a bold move.”

With an annual operating budget of then less than \$1 million, Bright and her team committed to raising \$1.2 million to help the families through the term of the five-year Hope VI grant and beyond with transportation, access to medical care, jobs, retraining if they needed it, and financial literacy.

“The board was very clear that we would not compromise our grant-making and our fundraising for our own annual budget for this particular project,” Bright said.

“We had to be careful to navigate. This is not in place of but in addition to,” she says with a chuckle.

The foundation chose vendors that could provide the work. The largest was Urban Strategies, still its major partner.

Bright, a Memphian, spent her career in the nonprofit sector, working 16 years for Junior Achievement in Memphis and in Kansas City. In 2000, she returned to Memphis to be executive director of the Women’s Foundation. In 2018, she was named president and CEO.

Teacher tour helps Junior Achievement open doors of entrepreneurship

“Our board and Ruby knew that if anyone could or should be leading this work with public housing, it was the Women’s Foundation,” said Shante Avant, deputy director, “because so many people in public housing were women and children.”

Within a year, the city won the same grant, but in a larger amount, to demolish Dixie Homes. Then came Cleaborn Homes and Foote Homes. The Women's Foundation raised money to support the human transitions through all the projects.

"There is no question, it's the bravest thing I have ever seen a nonprofit group do," said Susan Stephenson, co-founder and co-chairwoman of Independent Bank and a longtime member of the Women's Foundation's executive committee.

"In our history, we had raised probably 15 or 20% of the money we committed to raise for our first partnership with the Hope VI grant. We had lots of discussion, the appropriate level of both caution and fear," said Stephenson, who remembers the era in particular detail because she was treasurer.

"I remember Ruby looked at all of us and said, 'We can do this, and we can make an enormous difference in our community and in what we are able to do.'"

The money came from private donors, corporations and foundations but also a host of national donors who found the need in Memphis matched their targets.

"Ruby was such a visionary in thinking about, how do we take what we do best, which is raising funds to support women and children," Avant said. "She leveraged that. That's where we began to get many of our national dollars."

National donors include the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Walmart Foundation.

What the Women's Foundation quickly realized was the depth of the issues people in public housing were trying to manage, Stephenson said, "with no expectation that anyone was going to help.

"People of different generations were caring for each other out of necessity," she said. "We couldn't solve a single problem without uncovering five attendant problems. Transportation is always an issue but so is affordable health care and dental care. There was preparation for job interviews, then appropriate clothing."

When Women's Foundation leaders reported their findings to national donors, Stephenson says, they found it hard to comprehend.

"The first time we uttered multi-generational challenges, no one understood it. Now, everyone in the whole country is singing from that same hymnal. We have elevated our work. Clearly, we are recognized nationally. Certainly, Ruby is recognized as one of the extraordinary leaders in this space, work and thought. But it also transformed our organization."

Leslie Shaw, 60, had custody of a grandson when she was told she had to leave Dixie Homes, her home for nearly 15 years and the only apartment she had ever had. She initially refused.

"The first thing I want to let you know is Ruby is a breath of fresh air, candor and strength in my life. I want to say that," Shaw says firmly.

Shaw got herself moved to Springhill Creek apartments off Hollywood and got a call from Urban Strategies, one of the foundation's partners in the work.

A staffer suggested she enroll in "Getting Ahead in a Just Getting By World," an eight-week class the foundation offers to help people see the depth and vicissitude of poverty.

"In that class I learned I was poor, that I was living in poverty. I had grandchildren I wanted to be an example for," Shaw says.

"Ruby and them supported me to going to Southwest Community College. They kept up with my books. They bought me pencils, paper and gas money," she says.

When Shaw graduated, the Women's Foundation helped her get certified to teach the "Getting Ahead" class, allowing her to "educate the women and men in 38126," Shaw says.

"Ruby has helped me with my grandchildren for 15 years," she says. "She lifted me when I was depressed and didn't want to get up. We would talk things through, I would

get up and be OK.”

Shaw, like hundreds of women in Memphis, considers herself a philanthropist because she gives to the Women’s Foundation.

Six years ago, the foundation took the lessons it learned from the public housing transitions and chose to invest all its fundraising in ZIP code 38126.

It has raised \$7.1 million for projects and services to help people there, including investments in technology for LaRose Elementary and Booker T. Washington High.

The foundation leveraged an additional \$21.2 million for the area by granting money to others doing work in the space.

In the second half of 2021, the foundation and its grantees touched 2,500 lives in Memphis, said Marcia Bowden-Marche, board co-chair.

If projections hold, she said, the foundation in July expects to report helping 4,500 people in the first six months of 2022.

The board of directors will conduct a broad search for Bright’s replacement, said foundation co-chair Gina Brewer.

“We are confident in our ability to attract top talent both locally and nationally and look forward to this opportunity. In the meantime, we are going to celebrate the impact Ruby has had on the foundation and more importantly, the families in our community.”

Last week, the foundation’s leaders announced plans to extend the work to four other ZIP codes, 38105, 38106, 38102 and 38108.

“It’s a remarkable story,” Stephenson said. “I say it over and over again. We have taken on really hard challenges, emboldened by our leader and her commitment and passion for what we were about to do.

“But, it has made us smarter, better-equipped and more confident that we can make a difference. And we are going to keep doing it.”

TOPICS

RUBY BRIGHT

WOMEN'S FOUNDATION FOR A GREATER MEMPHIS



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