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GUEST EDITORIAL

Still Playing in Fort Myers

How fortunate I have been to live in Fort Myers for the last eighty-five years and to experience the birth and development of our local fine arts and entertainment. I came to Fort Myers in 1923 at the age of ten, when it was a small town of five thousand, far away from the bright lights of Broadway and other major entertainment centers.

Music was always an integral part of my life. My grandmother would play the Victrola, filling our home with great music. We dreamt of being front stage at big city performances. Because long distance travel was difficult, area performances by national artists were rare. To fill the void, churches and schools nurtured local artists, fostering music, dance, and cultural programs. My sister, Helen, and I eagerly participated in school plays, church choirs, and the burgeoning arts scene. Wonderful mentors fueled our artistic passions. For one glorious summer week annually, a traveling upstate New York Chautauqua group regaled us with classical music, theater, and classes on the banks of the Caloosahatchee River.

Even during my busiest years as a young mother, rearing two sons and helping my husband, George, run a contracting business, our family and friends found creative ways to provide free community performances. We founded the Fort Myers Community Concert Association in 1948 to draw even larger shows and international talent. Soon our programs overflowed school and city auditoriums, creating the need for a dedicated performing arts hall. Happily, a first-rate performing arts hall was approved by the Florida legislature in 1986 (with a nudge from my son, Franklin, then Chairman of the Education Budget Committee). It was built on the joint campuses of Edison College and The University of South Florida, and later given my name.



Today, I revel in the wide variety of great theater, dance, music, art, and culture that is now here for every age and taste. Being able to influence and lead some of this great movement was not so much a "labor of love," as pure enjoyment...more like "playing!"

With every May/June issue, *Times of the Islands* reminds us just how abundant art has become. Learn more about surrealism at the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg. Discover how the annual Santa Fe, New Mexico Indian market has become the center of the universe for Native American art. And, because I love and collect dolls, I'm eager to read about Katie Gardenia's magical, fairy tale world of doll sculptures in Matlacha.

I'm alive and well—and still "playing" to help maintain the arts momentum in Southwest Florida. Participate with me and thrill in the abundant art and entertainment that surrounds us!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barbara B. Mann".

Barbara B. Mann, President
Fort Myers Community
Concert Association

PHOTO COURTESY OF BARBARA B. MANN