

Saturday, June 28, 2003, 12:00 a.m. Pacific

Permission to reprint or copy this article/photo **must** be obtained from *The Seattle Times*. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail [resale@seattletimes.com](mailto:resale@seattletimes.com) with your request.

## Virginia Anderson, the powerhouse at the Center

By **Melinda Bargreen**  
*Seattle Times music critic*

When Virginia Anderson faced the cameras at a recent media tour of Marion Oliver McCaw Hall, she wore an iridescent purple jacket that echoed the hall's shiny interiors. So complete is her identification with her work as Seattle Center director that it's no surprise to see her dressing to match McCaw's walls.

This hall — which opens tonight — is the biggest, lengthiest project she has tackled in her 15 years at the Center, the capstone of more than \$350 million worth of investment in new construction and improvements.

Anderson is a dynamo, driven by a mission: to give others opportunities she never had, growing up poor as what she calls "a parched little plant" on Chicago's South Side. Whether it's sports, populist entertainment or high culture, Anderson wants the best for all comers at Seattle Center.

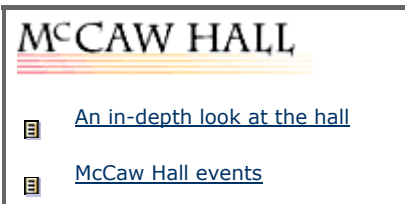
Anderson describes her life's mission as "dissolving boundaries. I care deeply about dissolving barriers at McCaw Hall, bringing what is inside to everyone outside."

The grim days following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, when people flocked to the Center for five days and nights, "distilled everything that we worked for," Anderson believes.

"People with purple hair and body piercings put their arms around little old ladies in white gloves, and everybody grieved. ... The Seattle Center is truly Seattle's center.

"Everything in our society tries to divide us by religion, color, age and income. The Center honors all people in an environment safe for them to experience the sense of community that is so profoundly needed. We host 14 cultural festivals, from Vietnamese to Spanish and Irish. We have little kids and seniors. It's a wonderful mishmash."

**Not a consensus-seeker**



As former Mayor Charles Royer, the man who appointed her, tells it, Anderson has "completely turned around" Seattle Center, and hasn't been afraid of a little confrontation: "Virginia doesn't suffer fools gladly, but she also knows how to negotiate."

A public servant who reports directly to the mayor, Anderson presides over 300 full-time employees and 500 more part-timers, and a budget of \$35 million. She has a formidable mind that stores up every imaginable statistic, and when she speaks, the phrases pour out of her as if she had been born on a speaker's rostrum — no "ums," "ers" or "you-knows."

She faced a Seattle Center in disarray and a demoralized, angry staff when she arrived in 1988. Anderson addressed what she calls "terrible union and racial relations" among staffers with her open-door policy, frequent meetings, disciplining of "unacceptable behavior" and straight talk. (One feud ended when Anderson took two directors out and told them, "I don't care about your history. This is over by Monday.")

Anderson doesn't negotiate by confrontation; neither is she a consensus-seeker.

"I'm comfortable without consensus," she says firmly.

"A few days ago, I got an e-mail that was being circulated regarding recommendations I had made about the monorail, asking 'What kind of crazy nincompoop would say that?' I responded, 'I am that nincompoop. And sometimes I am wrong; when I am, I admit it. But I am the director. If you are the director, you can do something different.' I try to respect all people, but I don't always agree with them."

Now Anderson has worked with four different mayors. None has wanted to replace her at this highly visible post.

"I think that speaks well for her people skills," says Royer. "She came in at a difficult time for the Center, and developed such a passion for the place."

That word "passion" comes up regularly when people talk about Virginia Anderson.

Norm Rice, who followed Royer as mayor, calls Anderson "just one consummate pro. I've never seen anyone so committed to the love and majesty of the Seattle Center, or anyone who has stayed on task so remarkably. She's a true, passionate visionary, and she should be treasured by this city."

And Donald Johnson, trustee of the Kreielsheimer Foundation (which poured more than \$10 million into McCaw Hall), calls her "the sine qua non" of the McCaw Hall project: "Without her I think it is doubtful it could have happened, certainly not with the speed and excellence of design and execution which has been achieved. I believe McCaw Hall is her crowning achievement to date."

### Discovering a 'different way'

Anderson stays on track like a freight train, in a job that could eat up 80 hours a week of her time if she let it. Not even the arrival six years ago of her long-sought, deeply-loved adopted daughter Maile has derailed her career, her commitment or her effectiveness in the nearly 10-year battle to turn the Opera House into McCaw Hall.

What makes Virginia run?

"What motivates me is the desire to give other people what I didn't have," she reflects.

"I don't come from a high-arts background; I never saw a performance until I was in my 20s. Access is a big motivator for me. Our glow at the Center is the reflected glow of the resident theaters and the Sonics and the Seattle Storm. It's the International Fountain that alternates Nirvana and Pearl Jam with Beethoven. What we have here isn't for a select few or a subset of society. We come together here for renewal."

Immaculately turned out in well-cut, stylish suits, Anderson didn't grow up in the lap of luxury. She grew up on the South Side of Chicago, a city full of great culture — none of which Anderson saw as the eldest in a single-parent family with six children.

"My mom was a waitress, and our life was about survival. She worked nights, so I was the baby-sitter for my younger siblings. I was the first person in my family to go to college."

Anderson knew there was more out there. In high school, she dated a boy — later her first husband — whose parents took her under their wing, taking her on vacations and to "lovely family dinners." She knew there was "a different way."

"I was smart and fortunate, and I did well in high school, but it wasn't a happy time. I knew I'd need scholarships and loans in order to go to college, so I worked hard. I was elected to offices and that sort of thing, but my emotional energy was at home. I was very serious; I worried a lot."

#### Virginia Anderson

**1947:** Born, Grand Junction,

Colo.

**1970:** Bachelor of arts degree, Southern Connecticut State

College.

**1973-1974:** Planner, King County office of budget and management.

**1974:** Master's degree in public administration, University of Washington.

**1974-1979:** Project manager, City of Seattle office of community development; budget analyst, office of finance and budget.

**1979-1988:** Senior vice president, Cornerstone Development

**1988-present:** Director, Seattle Center.

No wonder Anderson gravitated toward the subject of affordable housing after college. She began as a planner in the King County office of budget and management, then as a project manager at the City of Seattle office of community development, and joined the Cornerstone Development Co., where she rose to senior vice president before her appointment as Seattle Center director.

"I went to eight grade schools, because we always had to move," she says softly. "I didn't have stable housing. That's how I know how important it is."

That was the year Anderson started the lengthy and difficult process of adopting a Chinese baby. Maile is 7 now, and Anderson's face glows when she talks about "the child of my soul."

"We're both very strong willed," she explains.

"I try to keep her in the fairway of life, out of the rough. Your job as a parent is to love children enough so that they leave you a little more every day. That's excruciatingly difficult."

### **Tough love**

Anderson, who took her mother's maiden name as a surname, comes from what she calls "a long line of strong-willed women." But powerful and assertive women don't always do well in our society.

Anderson herself shakes her head when she says, "I'll come out of a meeting where I've been tough but very fair, and I haven't pounded the table or lost my temper or done any of the things I've seen men do. And afterwards I'll hear, 'What a bitch.' When you're a man, you're tenacious and strong; when you're a woman, you're bitchy. I think it's because people can't reconcile the nurturing that is women's role and the toughness that women can display in their work."

That toughness earns her the admiration of her peers.

"What I love most about Virginia Anderson is her fierce determination to get whatever she works on right. She is immensely practical," says Seattle Opera general director Speight Jenkins, who has worked with her closely.

"When we had to cut \$10 million out of the (McCaw Hall) budget, she, Kent (Stowell) and I met and accomplished it quickly and efficiently. Her sunny disposition, however, is housed in a steel-trap mind that knows exactly what she wants and usually how to get it. On donors, no one was ever as dogged. She brought in money that I didn't think was possible, and in one instance kept on me until I brought in bacon that I thought was impossible to attain."

These days, Anderson says she has downsized her life as a single mom — selling a bigger home for a more modest one, strictly monitoring her work hours. She rises at 7, gets ready for work, gets Maile up, and fixes breakfast and a packed lunch. After dropping her daughter off at school, Anderson arrives in the office at 9 a.m. and "hits the pavement running," as she puts it.

Some days she's negotiating with the Sonics; some days working on capital projects or arranging the repair of sewer or steam lines.

At 5:53 p.m., she drops everything to drive up Queen Anne Hill and pick up her daughter from after-school care. The two spend evenings and weekends on fun projects like a lemonade and cookie stand, or schoolwork, or watching movies together.

"I get to live a childhood I didn't get," she reflects.

"I have an incredibly rich life. I have a wonderful little girl, and I get to work with the world's most interesting people."

*Melinda Bargreen: [mbargreen@seattletimes.com](mailto:mbargreen@seattletimes.com)*