



Barbara Newman became the Blues Foundation's President and CEO in late 2015
Photo by Holly Whitfield

By Tim Parsons

Through a window in her new office, Barbara Newman can look across a hallway and see an art exhibit.

"I am staring at Charlie Musselwhite's face," she said. "Charlie and I have a thing going on right now. He doesn't realize this, but we've got a thing happening. His eyes are closed but mine are open. We're simpatico here."

The lifecast of Musselwhite is one of 40 pieces on temporary display upstairs at 421 S. Main Street in Memphis, TN, – the headquarters for the Blues Foundation and Blues Hall of Fame, which opened in 2015. Newman became the organization's president and CEO on October 1 that same year, replacing Jay Sieleman, who held the job for nearly 13 years after he saved the not-for-profit organization from financial ruin.

"The transition's been really great, and I have to give a big shout out to Jay," Newman said. "It's an absolute gift to be able to walk into an organization that has a solid base because it allows me to be very creative. It opened doors for me to be creative about ways to grow, engage and build upon what's here, rather than having to narrow my focus to keeping the doors open."

Years ago, Sister Rosetta Tharpe was the first blues artist to strike a chord for Newman. "She opened the doors for me to all of that acoustic, older blues music, and the door got wider and wider," she said. "It's a huge door and it's been a really fun one to walk through."

The job is a perfect match for Newman, an Ivy League-educated financial expert and a fourth-generation Memphis resident. She's been around music her whole life; her uncle Eddie Freudberg was a session violin player at Stax Records. Newman studied economics and political science at Brown University, and upon graduation, went to work at the New York National Westminster Bank.

"I read lots of financial statements and learned how to analyze them and ended up a middle market lender," she said. "I managed a \$40 million loan portfolio and was an account executive that worked with mostly West Side Manhattan

BARBARA NEWMAN:

Taking Lead of the Blues Foundation

businesses." One of those businesses was the Power Station, a recording studio partly owned by Tony Bon Jovi, the cousin of the rock musician Jon Bon Jovi. Here, she learned the financial side of running a recording studio, plus, she also got to meet artists like David Bowie.

In 1986, she married Bruce Newman, an entertainment attorney who had a list of clients that included jazz guitarist Stanley Jordan and doo-wap singer Earl "Speedoo" Carroll of Speedoo and the Cadillacs. After the Newmans had a child, they moved to Memphis in 1989, where there were plenty of music business opportunities for Bruce. The couple collaborated to present musical programs as fundraising events: the first, a Woody Guthrie retrospective at Theatre Memphis starring artists such as Richie Havens, Odetta and Ramblin' Jack Elliot.

"We've done large events and small events," she said. "We went through the folklore and that opened me up to the blues more."

Barbara Newman worked with various not-for-profit organizations, including eight years as the executive director of a synagogue.

"Any not-for-profit, whether it's faith-based or a general not-for-profit, has the same structure, dealing with budgets and strategic plans and facility management," she said. "You are dealing with meeting the needs of lots of members, while also trying to fulfill the mission of the organization at the same time."

One of the first projects under Newman's direction with the Blues Foundation was to rewrite the mission statement to four concise goals: "To preserve blues heritage. To celebrate blues recording and performance. To expand worldwide awareness of the blues. To ensure the future of this uniquely American art form."

The Blues Foundation is a multimillion dollar operation that presents two major events, the International Blues Challenge (IBC) in late January and the Blues Music Awards (BMA) in early May. Newman had a full month to meet people and learn about the Blues Foundation, and then she spent another two weeks in

office with Sieleman before she officially went to work. Sieleman remains with the organization as a consultant.

"Jay's been extremely available and accessible," she said. "He's helped close out some things that he'd started. Some of the different award processes were already begun before I walked in the door; he stuck around and helped close them out. It's given me a little more space to get up to speed. This transition will probably be the most intense year since everything's taking a little longer to do because I have to learn what I'm doing."

The IBC this year, which had 257 acts with nearly 900 musicians from 14 countries, went "phenomenally well," Newman said. Newman and the Foundation's Board President Paul Benjamin made a point to squeeze into each of the 20 venues on the opening night to welcome everyone.

"I learned that I have an amazing staff. Everyone knew exactly what they were supposed to do. I needed to be able to trust what they do because it's a giant operation... I am a person who needs eight hours of sleep each night. That was the thing I was most nervous about – how I could make it Tuesday through Sunday with that little amount of sleep. But I was so energized by the IBCs that I didn't even realize I wasn't sleeping."

While overseeing the Blues Foundation is a daunting task, it's one that seems ideal for Newman. During her short commute to 421 S. Main Street, she listens to music. The CDs in her car at the moment are Buddy Guy, Harrison Kennedy and Shakura S'Aida, and, of course, there is WEVL, a blues-based volunteer radio station that features a Wednesday morning folk show hosted by Bruce Newman.

"Music is key, but the blues represents a very important part of American history," Barbara Newman said. "It's something that we have to be aware of, and we have to respect and honor it by keeping the music in the forefront. That's what we're doing." 🎵

Tim Parsons is the 2011 recipient of the Blues Foundation's Keeping the Blues Alive award for Journalism. He lives at Lake Tahoe and is the editor-in-chief of the online music magazine Tahoe Onstage, www.tahoeonstage.com. He also is a contributing writer for Blues Music Magazine.



Newman with statue of Little Milton in front of the Blues Hall of Fame
Photo by Bruce Newman

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