

Montalvo makeover: New executive director thinks big about the future

By Richard Scheinin

Mercury News

05/18/2009



Angela McConnell is fired up. The Montalvo Arts Center's new executive director recalls how she stirred up — and no doubt shocked — the center's board of trustees with her vision for a 100th anniversary celebration, just three years down the road.

It happened while interviewing for the job: "I said, 'Guys, this is the chance for a major campaign. And anything less than \$100 million — a \$100 million centennial campaign — doesn't make sense. And I think it's doable.' "

A venerable South Bay institution that's arguably been off its game the past several years, Montalvo might not seem the likeliest candidate for raising such a sum in hard times. It has cut programs and dipped into its endowed and reserved funds to the tune of \$1.8 million. Once home to a robust mix of musical and other events, the 175-acre complex in the Saratoga hills is suffering through an identity crisis.

Yet McConnell, known as a go-getter arts administrator in the valley, is challenging the board to think big: Don't just bring back discarded programming. Make it compelling. Engage the community. Collaborate with its great institutions.

Because to stay the course is to court disaster.

"If the organization loses another \$1 million to \$2 million over the next year," she told her new bosses, "there's no turning back."

For several years now, Montalvo has groped for a winning formula. Long known for its popular and classical music concerts, which grew harder to sustain after the dot-com bust, it shifted toward contemporary visual arts and multimedia, examining issues including the war in Iraq. But people weren't always interested.

It has now decided that it wants to be about music and the visual arts, to be popular and cutting edge, and to show off its acclaimed residency program that gives artists of various genres free rein to create.

"We're trying to get our balance back," said Charmaine Warmenhoven, president of the board that appointed McConnell on Thursday. "Angela's got wonderful energy and fundraising abilities."

McConnell, 46, managed a \$10 million endowment campaign for the San Jose Museum of Art as its chief development officer. She led a \$12.4 million capital campaign to build a handsome new facility for the Community School of Music and Arts in Mountain View, where fundraising had stalled before her five-year tenure as executive director, starting in 2001.

"She took it from a pretty good group to what it is now, which is fantastic," said Bruce Labadie, a longtime valley music booker and Montalvo's performing arts director from 1995 until 2006.

The challenges McConnell faces are not only financial as she tries to work wonders within a \$4.5 million operating budget. Just as big a hurdle could be maintaining the integrity of the center's programming. It recently contracted with Live Nation to book pop acts into its outdoor Garden Theatre. This summer, the national music presenter, which also books the nearby Mountain Winery, is bringing in boomer acts like Julio Iglesias and Peter Frampton. Is that all that Montalvo is about?

McConnell, who begins her new job today, believes the shows will help bring crowds back, and she also intends to regrow Montalvo's formerly world-class indoor chamber music series.

"I don't think it has to be a choice: popular concert versus high artistic integrity," she said in an interview at her Los Altos home.

For the centenary celebration of the Montalvo estate, built in 1912 by Sen. James Phelan and long a home to the arts, she fired off possibilities, everything from a reunion of hundreds of brides married at Montalvo (long a popular wedding venue) to a retrospective of work by the artists who have participated in its residency programs, dating back to the 1930s.

"There are dreams I've been dreaming," McConnell said, "to help Montalvo reach its splendor."

McConnell succeeds Robert Sain, who arrived in 2006 from Los Angeles, where he directed the research and development wing of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Sain moved Montalvo away from music programming and put more emphasis on its artist residency program, while starting multi-media collaborations with local graphic design firms, schools and others.

As conceptually appealing as some of those programs were — the "Iraq: Reframe" series examined the war in Iraq — they didn't necessarily resonate with audiences. Meanwhile, Montalvo kept downsizing its music programs and dipping into reserve funds, as it had even in the year before Sain's arrival. Those funds have dropped from \$3 million to \$1.2 million in the past four years.

McConnell said the current agenda should be "about opening up the doors and windows of Montalvo to the community." The center, she said, should extend a collaborative hand to area universities, the [Music@Menlo festival](#) and the San Jose Museum of Art.

Though her plans ride on hopes for an economic recovery, McConnell says she will generate new income: Expand an arts summer camp. Make Montalvo a destination for corporate events.

And tap all connections: Well acquainted with the Sand Hill Road venture capital community, McConnell suggests that pocketbooks are waiting to be paired with programs.

She paused to laugh at the multitude of jobs ahead. "There are a lot of plates," she said, "that are going to be spinning."

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Angela McConnell

1963: Born in Yonkers, N.Y.

1985: Graduated from Manhattanville College, Purchase, N.Y., with a bachelor's degree in psychology, minor in art history and music performance.

1995: Graduated from University of San Francisco with a master's degree in nonprofit administration.

1994-99: San Jose Museum of Art, chief development officer

2001-06: Executive director, Community School of Music and Arts, Mountain View

2005: Named Professional Fundraiser of the Year by the Association of Fundraising Professionals.

Outside interests: Piano, singing, musical theater.