

Hepburn's return good news

Valerie Hepburn is back in town and I am glad. You should be, too. Truth be told, it is in large part because of you that she is back. She loves this place and the people within it.

After having completed a highly successful five years as president of the College of Coastal Georgia in 2012, followed by a year-long assignment in Athens with the University System of Georgia involving her expertise in health and education policy projects, Dr. Hepburn has returned to the Golden Isles as president and chief executive officer of Communities of Coastal Georgia Foundation, a \$10 million organization serving Glynn, Camden and McIntosh counties.

The Foundation is approaching its 10th anniversary and if her past record is any indication, the organization is going to become bigger than a breadbasket before she gets through. Valerie Hepburn put the College of Coastal Georgia on the map. Not only was she instrumental in morphing two-year Brunswick College into a four-year college with degree programs in American Studies, Biological Sciences, Business Administration, Health Informatics, Mathematics, Nursing, Psychology, Public Affairs and Teacher Education, but she was also the institution's MVP (Most Visible Promoter.)

I called her right after she got settled into her new job at the foundation. She sounds right at home although she says it is quite a change after more than 30 years spent mostly in academia and state government. "I am a 'recovering bureaucrat,'" she quips.

She is being modest. Valerie Hepburn has served in a variety of leadership positions in the executive branch of state government and in the University System of Georgia over her career and has done



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them all well.

Interestingly, the Golden Isles were never on her career radar screen until she was asked to accept the assignment as interim president of the college and supervise its transition to a four-year school. At the time, she was the academic dean at the School of Public Health at the University of Georgia.

As she tells it, "Never in a million years did I think I would ever leave Athens. One day, I was sitting at my desk, minding my own business when the phone rang. It was the chancellor's office seeking my advice on who might serve as an interim president in Brunswick. I told them I had no idea. They said, 'We think you can. You will only be gone six months.'" That is why she came.

"I really never intended to stay but after I got here, I saw the power of the spirit of service as I began to interact with the local community," she says. "People here truly care about wanting to make things better." And that is why she is back.

Valerie Hepburn is the rare individual who is equally comfortable discussing some arcane area of public health policy that only policy wonks could understand and then seamlessly transitioning into a discussion of the current state of Georgia politics, which sometimes I don't understand.

That makes her the ideal person to head up the Community Foundation of Coastal Georgia.

The foundation is a tax-exempt public charity – one of more than 700 in the country – that combines the financial resources of individuals and companies in the community to support non-profit organizations in the local area. Or as Hepburn says, "It is a way to bring the goodness of the donor to the problems that need to be fixed." And she is confident that will happen.

Hepburn's says her first challenge as CEO is to listen to the community. "I have asked our executive committee to take the next 90 days and talk to groups about what they see as the most pressing needs and bring those ideas back so that we can determine how best to employ our assets." She cites a host of potential targets such as early childhood education, literacy, poverty, health and issues that are unique to rural or urban areas.

She also wants the foundation to do a better job of marketing itself in the three counties it serves. "We need to get the word out that we can be a vessel for goodness," she says.

Hepburn is most enthusiastic when she talks about the potential of the foundation. "We can move the needle on issues and see that needle move," she says. "Community foundations like ours can truly make a difference. It is very exciting."

Dr. Valerie Hepburn has been moving the needle since she first arrived on the Golden Isles for her "temporary assignment" at the College of Coastal Georgia in 2009.

Now, she is turning her attention to marshalling the resources of our community to help those in need. I can think of no better objective or anyone better suited to help us achieve it. She's the real deal.

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