

After an illustrious career in government and public broadcasting, **Ervin Duggan** assumed the helm of the Society for the Four Arts. And Palm Beach is better for it.

ERVIN DUGGAN IS like most refined Southern gentlemen: He's a great storyteller as long as he is not the subject of the tale.

Press him to share a few of the memorable lines he crafted as a speechwriter during the Johnson and Carter administrations and he'll brush you off with a firm, but polite "It would be immodest to do that."

Mention the political novel he co-wrote with another Johnson aide and he'll say, "The critics liked it, but it was much better to have written the book than to write it."

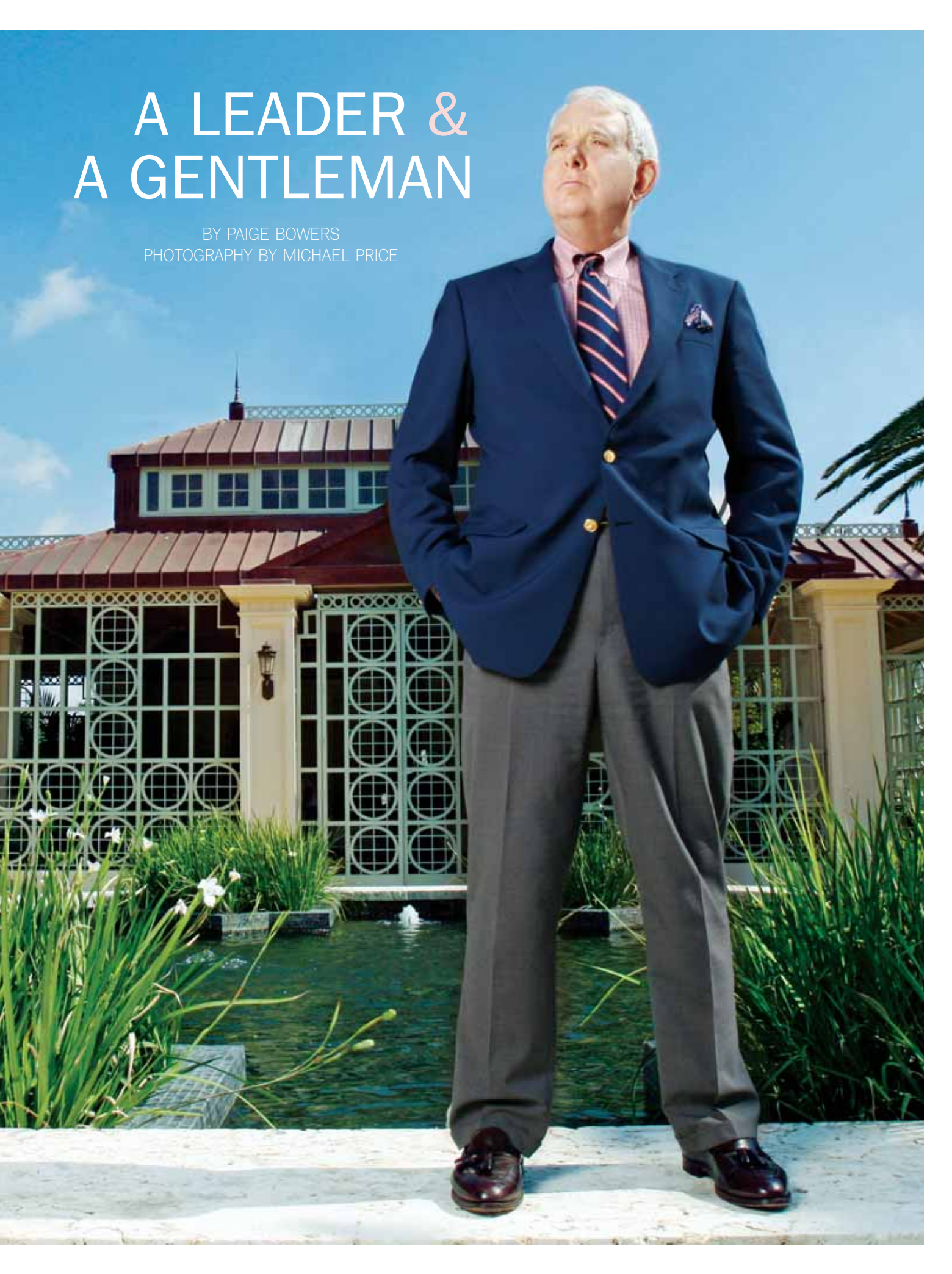
Ask him about his stint as an apprentice reporter at the *Washington Post* in the early 1960s and he'll tell you about interviewing the soon-to-be former Atlanta mayor, William B. Hartsfield. His anecdote-rich story landed on page one, he says, "not because of my reporting, but because Hartsfield was such an interesting subject."

Duggan is just not a man who craves attention. As a matter of fact, he'd rather talk about the Society of the Four Arts, the cultural institution he now heads after a long career in public service, or its new chairperson, Edith Dixon, who assumed the role after her predecessor and husband, Fitz Dixon, passed away in 2006.



# A LEADER & A GENTLEMAN

BY PAIGE BOWERS  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL PRICE



“[DUGGAN] REALLY IS THE ARCHITECT OF THIS INSTITUTION.”

—MARY MORSE, TRUSTEE

And yet, for all his self-effacing ways, this much is inescapable: The Four Arts has blossomed under Duggan's leadership and because of his Rolodex. With a slate of high-profile speakers and events, series of culture-related classes and a multimillion-dollar expansion of its campus and gardens, the institution has evolved into something of a small but thriving liberal arts college that's open to everyone.

“We were just bobbing along before,” says Barry Hoyt, the vice-chairman of the Four Arts. “But Ervin has brought a great deal of energy to the organization, and that has shown itself in how he has expanded

the Lyndon B. Johnson White House some six months later.

Needless to say, Duggan never did make it to law school. As it turned out, the White House was “a fascinating graduate school” that he says taught him more than he ever learned in any other concentrated period in his life.

One of the biggest lessons he learned: the importance of gratitude. “President Johnson, for example, was very focused on thanking people,” Duggan says. “Whether it was a congressman from an opposing party who voted for his legislation or a telephone operator, he would acknowledge them.”

Carter's secretary of Health Education and Welfare until 1979.

Duggan's instincts also led to other prominent positions on the State Department's policy planning staff and as a commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission. But his next job—a turbulent period as president of Public Broadcasting Service—is what whet his appetite for running a small cultural organization where efforts bear fruit quickly.

“PBS was wonderful and frustrating at the same time,” Duggan recalls. “It's a great job because it has this great cultural



the things we offer to members and the community. The excitement around the Four Arts right now is because of him.”

Raised in a small South Carolina town by “a family of talkers and storytellers,” Duggan says he grew up believing that small was beautiful, even though a major part of his career would revolve around big-city life.

A law school hopeful who wrote for his campus newspaper at Davidson University, Duggan was recruited by the *Washington Post* in April of his senior year.

Duggan did not stay at the *Post* for long. After writing obituaries and covering the cops and courts beat, he branched out into writing general assignment features before leaving the paper to take a yearlong fellowship to study in Europe. He returned to the paper in 1964, only to be recruited away by

He also learned about the power of hard work. “Before I went to the White House, I imagined that the people there were that many times smarter and qualitatively more different from anyone else,” he recalls. “But when I got there, I learned that it was about working hard and getting things done.”

Even so, at the end of his time in the Johnson White House, Duggan says he needed to take a “decompression year.” He joined the Smithsonian Institution as director of special projects.

After the Smithsonian, Duggan co-wrote the critically acclaimed novel *Against All Enemies*—about a president who starts a Vietnam-like war—with fellow Johnson aide Ben J. Wattenberg. He also was an aide to Senator Adlai Stevenson, and to Joseph Califano, who was President

mission to, for example, bring the Metropolitan Opera into homes across the country. And yet, there was always a long-running debate with the local stations about how they're governed, which got very tiresome after a while.”

During his term at PBS, Duggan expanded programming for children and modernized the channel with branding efforts that led to a 70-percent revenue increase. Ultimately, Duggan resigned from PBS in 1999.

“My career had been one where I had been so busy all the time ... so that the opportunity to have deep friendships was compromised,” Duggan says. “My wife and I are both Southerners and roots are important to us. So we wanted to start a new

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# A Leader & a Gentleman

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chapter in a place that was small enough where we could build friendships, not acquaintanceships.”

And then a headhunter called about an opportunity to head a small cultural institution—the Society of the Four Arts. “The opportunity was fascinating and unusual and called upon every lesson I’ve had to learn,” Duggan says. “When I came to Palm Beach, I liked the people on the search committee and liked the people I met and liked the institution. And I was filled with joy and excitement at the opportunity to deal somewhat closer to the ground, where you can see results quickly.”

Dixon says it was pure luck that Duggan was available when they were looking for a new hire. “If this had happened a little earlier or a little later, we probably wouldn’t have had the opportunity to talk to him at all,” she says.

“To be head of PBS, you have to be a

talented, highly qualified individual accustomed to working with various groups of people,” Hoyt says. “And that’s comparable to working with our trustees, who have various points of view.”

Trustees agree that Duggan has raised the bar for cultural programming at the Four Arts. “Every year, the programming just gets better,” says Mary Morse, a trustee, who has spent time with the Duggan family at their North Georgia mountain retreat. “Clearly it’s because he understands world events and the cultural landscape and knows how to attract interesting dignitaries, authors, poets and artisans. He really is the architect of this institution.”

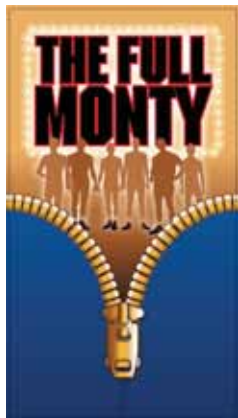
So far, this “architect” has built: the Campus on the Lake program that offers lectures, classes, symposiums, arts-related travel and other eclectic programs that enhance the Four Arts’ mission; the mul-

timillion-dollar development of the two-acre Philip Hultar Sculpture Garden; the Florida Voices program, which brings authors in to talk about their books; and a plethora of movies and concerts that have the “campus humming with activity every day of the week.”

The Four Arts plans to acquire the old Palm Beach public school building on the northeast corner of the campus and redevelop it into an education building with a 250-seat theater, more classrooms, and apartment space for an artist-in-residence program.

“That means that instead of passively consuming someone’s creative output, people can begin exploring the creative process from the inside,” Duggan says. “There’s no greater way to appreciate creative things than by doing them. Only then do you realize how difficult and wonderful and absorbing it is.” ♦

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