

Execs bring can-do attitude

Latest August Wilson Center board choices reveal strategy to advance arts, cultural hub

by NATASHA LINDSTROM

The two business executives tapped to govern the newly debt-free nonprofit August Wilson Center for African American Culture share a similar leadership strategy: Listen, learn, execute — then perhaps most importantly, admit mistakes and shift course when plans don't pan out.

"If something's not working, you stop, you evaluate, you change, and you keep going," said Richard W. Taylor, one of two men installed last week on the nonprofit board that owns the center's downtown Pittsburgh property, which narrowly escaped foreclosure last fall. "That's the way any business moves forward."

Taylor, 45, of the Hill District and fellow newly appointed trustee Michael Polite, 53, of

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Squirrel Hill also share the belief that a vibrant arts and cultural hub can unite and energize a region.

"People who are different or come from different ethnic backgrounds, they do come together around the arts," said Polite, chairman and CEO of urban property developer Ralph A. Falbo Inc. "It's a way for us to build bridges among our really diverse community."

"The more we learn about each other's journey," echoed Taylor, CEO of energy-saving lighting supplier ImbuTec, "the better off we are at understanding and being able to work together."

A fresh start

Neither man was involved in the August Wilson Center's former leadership, though each paid close attention to news reports and community

buzz as the center's \$40 million Downtown building nearly went bankrupt — its doors locked, bills and employees unpaid, and millions of dollars in taxpayer and foundation contributions at risk of being squandered with nothing to show for it.

"It was painful to watch," said Taylor, who received updates on the center's woes while on the board of Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh.

Named for Pulitzer Prize-winning Hill District playwright August Wilson, the center struggled to pay bills from the day it opened, plagued by nearly \$12 million in debt after failing to budget for construction overruns. The boat-shaped building at Liberty Avenue and William Penn Place fell into a court-ordered conservatorship in late 2013, less than five years after its highly touted grand opening.

A coalition of foundations that bought the center at a Nov. 5 Allegheny County sheriff's sale are counting on Taylor and Polite to guide the launch of the so-called "AWC 2.0."

"They're both politically astute. They're both financially astute and good businessmen," said Jeffrey Letwin, who served alongside Taylor on the Port Authority of Allegheny County and has done business with Polite. "Both have been charged with stewardship of other entities that had to deal with financial challenges, and they probably bring the same level-headed demeanor."

The first step to the AWC 2.0, the two newly appointed trustees agree, is developing a solid business plan that takes into account past mistakes at the center, as well as smart moves that bolstered other arts organizations.

"I see it as having daily life, and not just evening life," Po-

lite said, "but you've got to build up to that."

Richard Taylor

Taylor credits his passion for improving communities to his parents and high-profile mentors — from civil rights activists to then-Gov. Bill Clinton — while growing up in Baton Rouge, La., and attending college at Georgetown University in Washington.

He used to spend hours discussing civil rights issues at the home of J.K. Haynes, who helped sneak into town Thurgood Marshall, and with his pastor, the Rev. T.J. Jemison, who led the first civil rights boycott of segregated busing.

Taylor had regular encounters with renowned poets such as Nikki Giovanni and Gwendolyn Brooks, the first black woman to win a Pulitzer Prize.

His mother, Lelia Taylor, organized black poetry festivals at Southern University, where she was an English professor. His father, Earl T. Taylor, who died this month, was a nationally renowned operatic tenor who performed at Clinton's 1993 presidential inauguration and led Southern University's statewide adult literacy program.

"I grew up being very fortunate to have extensive exposure to the arts," Richard Taylor said. "It connects you to people, and it broadens your horizon."

During his time with Macedonia Development Corp. in Pittsburgh, he helped buy and rehabilitate abandoned properties across the Hill District, spurring the first new development in the Middle Hill in about 25 years.

He likens the tough decisions he will be making for the center to ones he had to make while with the Port Authority of Allegheny County, which laid off



180 employees and slashed service by 15 percent in 2011.

"He's a good thinker, and he raises the right kind of questions. He's not a 'yes man,'" Letwin said.

Michael Polite

Polite grew up in Moore Haven, Fla., about 100 miles northwest of Miami. His parents were migrant workers who moved the family to western New York when he was 7.

In New York, his dad worked in a tire factory, and his mom worked as a licensed practical nurse.

Amid President Lyndon B. Johnson's anti-poverty campaign, Polite's parents worked to improve the working conditions of migrant workers and to bring health services to people living in labor camps.

Polite joined the Marine Corps Reserves while in college at Niagara University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in criminal justice.

Rather than pursue a career in law enforcement, Polite decided to study urban and public affairs at Carnegie Mellon University. He wanted to learn how to revitalize areas affected by the collapse of the domestic steel industry, such as Buffalo and Pittsburgh.

He started his career in Washington's public works department, putting together digital databases to track sys-

tems and work orders in the mid-1980s, just as personal computers began filling offices nationwide.

In Pittsburgh, he joined the Urban Redevelopment Authority, working his way up to director of economic development in the early 1990s before starting his private firm, Black Mountain Development.

Polite recently became a majority owner in Falbo.

"I find him to be one of the brightest guys that I've ever met in the housing industry, and he's very meditative about what he does," Ralph Falbo Jr. said of Polite. "He thinks it through very carefully and doesn't make rash decisions."

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Taylor



Polite

