



Basic Instincts

By Audrey Arthur

On a typical weekday morning, groups of children and adults fan out across Zoo Atlanta, located in the heart of Grant Park, to take in more than 200 species of animals at one of Atlanta's most visited attractions. At the top of the sightseeing list for many are the Zoo's two popular exhibits, the African elephant trio and the gorillas. As the hustle and bustle ensues and the day stretches into evening, a diverse leadership team and staff remain behind the scenes, keeping zoo operations running smoothly.

Five of the top eight executives on Zoo Atlanta's leadership team are African American. Each one has the distinction of being the first African American to hold their respective positions and exemplifies careful efforts by the Zoo's equally diverse board of directors to ensure the zoological institute's visitors, workforce, and vendors reflect the diversity of the neighborhood and city that surround it.

Directing the call for diversity is Zoo Atlanta President and CEO Dennis Kelly, who says a commitment to diversity is a key component of Zoo Atlanta's 10-year strategic plan. "A diverse staff, Board, visitor, membership and supplier base is one of my highest personal priorities," Kelly says. "Diversity is important to me for two reasons: First, a diverse workplace is simply the right thing to do, and [offers] a much more fun and enriching work and social environment. Second, it makes great business sense. A lack of focus on, say, the values and culture of the African-American community means a business person is ignoring the benefits, talents, strengths and profit potential of about one-third of all Georgians and metro Atlantans."

Cary Burgess: Meeting Customer Expectations

Managing the day-to-day operation of the Zoo is Cary Burgess, senior vice president/director of operations and guest services. Burgess' to-do list is crammed each day as he handles logistical planning and management of the Zoo's operations and guest services functions, which essentially boils down to overseeing security, the gift shop, food services, rides and attractions, housekeeping, special events, public events and rentals, and the warehouse.

A career in the zoological field was purely happenstance for Burgess. He was looking for a summer job to fill in between high school and his first year at Prince George's Community College in Maryland, but soon found he had an interest in the zoological profession. "I fell in love with the opportunity. I think people call it the 'zoo bug.' Once you're bitten, there's no antidote," he says. Burgess quickly moved from intern to part time [and then] full time at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. By the time he accepted a position with Zoo Atlanta three years later, in 1988, he was director of transportation and parking operations, and special events logistical and operations coordinator for Friends of the National Zoo.

"Every day at the Zoo brings new challenges," adds Burgess, who has led several zoo-sponsored photographic adventures to Kenya, Tanzania and Antarctica. "I oversee everything from executing large events and fundraising opportunities to ensuring a quality customer service experience for every customer who walks through the door. No one day is like another." Burgess acknowledges he has more "moments of truth" with guests when he is out on the property than any other department at the Zoo, and "with those moments of truth you have a chance to do a great job and meet expectations."

Burgess is thrilled by the prospect of being involved with a conservation/education facility like Zoo Atlanta. Just as satisfying for Burgess is the excitement he witnesses when children come to the Zoo and "get it." He notes, "It's rewarding to see the wonderment in children's eyes. Kids who may not have had an interest in science are provided with an educational experience they may not have thought they were going to get ... Conservation does not stop at a certain zip code, nor does education. We have a challenge to encourage education and conservation beyond zip codes."



Today, Burgess is chair of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums diversity committee, helping the zoological field transition into a more inclusive one. He recalls that when he began attending AZA conferences years ago, he knew practically every woman and person of color at the conference on a first name basis because there were so few. Times have changed significantly, and for the better.

"We are no where near where we need to be, but we've made tremendous strides in improving the diversity of leadership within our member institutions around country. We've been able to do so by making people aware of the importance of diversity and keeping them abreast of changing demographics and the need to mirror communities we serve," says Burgess.

Zoo Atlanta has made headway when it comes to bringing in a diverse body of visitors. On average, the Zoo has 700,000 visitors each year. A 2007 Morey survey annual report indicates African Americans make up 32 percent of the Zoo's annual visitor numbers, and Hispanics — 3 percent. Those statistics place Zoo Atlanta in the top third for attendance within the ranks of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums' 218 accredited members.

Keisha Hines-Davis: Keeping Zoo Atlanta Top of Mind

With countless entertainment and recreational venues competing for the attention and dollars of Atlanta residents, Keisha Hines-Davis, director of public relations and communications, is on the front lines — positioning Zoo Atlanta as not only a premier destination but a major player among research institutions.

Soon after joining the staff, Hines-Davis, a former public relations manager with the City of Atlanta, put her public affairs skills to the test, creating the first State of the Zoo breakfast this past April. The event brought together elected officials, community leaders, board members, media and friends to hear the Zoo Atlanta story.

"I felt we needed to give context and tell those stories that sometimes don't get told because we are busy with the day-to-day management of the Zoo," she explains. "[President] Kelly captured attendees' attention by talking about where the Zoo once was, where we are now, [and] all the great and exciting things that are taking place, as well as where we are going as a leading zoological institute."

Assisted by a staff of two, Hines-Davis' goal is to keep Zoo Atlanta in the news. She relates, "In government you tend to be more reactive. With Zoo Atlanta, we have a chance to be more proactive. Every day is a good day. And there is always a good story to share about the Zoo." When it comes to deciding which stories to tell, Hines-Davis envisions her job as a balancing act, as her office fields between 20 to 50 media calls a week. Each day brings a different scenario. One day it could be a BET crew arriving to film a segment and the next day an HGTV film crew is scouting a site. Of each media opportunity," Hines-Davis says, "I have to determine what's the best fit so that it doesn't jeopardize the integrity and credibility of the Zoo."

It's not always as easy as telling the story of a cuddly, cute baby panda but instead involves crafting a tale about a current exhibit such as the naked mole rat — easily one of the ugliest creatures on the planet — that keeps visitors coming back. But to Hines-Davis that in and of itself makes her job fascinating and all the more challenging professionally.

She credits her confidence in getting the job done to her college days at Morgan State University. "I was taught that whatever you wanted to achieve you could do it. [My professors] taught us there would be challenges and we had to be 10 times smarter and know our stuff ... and that's good because it made us better." Melding her HBCU background with her government and non-profit public relations background, Hines-Davis says, "I am able to get in front of things and strategize."

Pamela Weston: Creating the Best Work Environment

Pamela Weston, vice president of human resources at Zoo Atlanta, recruited Hines-Davis. Bringing in such talent and watching her blossom as well as making a difference at the end of the day with other employees has been central to Weston. "Each of us has an opportunity to help develop the zoo, to help its people grow and that has kept me here," says Weston, a graduate of California Polytechnic University, Pomona.

Although Zoo Atlanta had a human resources department in place when she arrived seven years ago, Weston immediately revamped the division; implementing new human resource-oriented policies and procedures, creating an employee handbook and developing a management-training program. Overall, Weston manages organizational development. She does a fair amount of coaching and employee relations, facilitates recruitment and retention efforts and handles performance management, compensation and benefits administration. She is also responsible for the organization's volunteer resources, overseeing the Zoo's 275 volunteers.





Marcus Margerum

"When I first started working here at the Zoo, I don't think our employee population represented the community we served," she acknowledges. "It is challenging for the community to embrace what we do if we don't reflect the community. With our recruiting and retention efforts, we now have a very diverse work environment." The Zoo's employee numbers back up Weston's claim: more than 30 percent of its 185 full-time positions are held by African Americans and 90 percent of the president's direct reports are employees of diverse gender and race. Four of those eight direct reports are African American.

The diligence of Weston and others is also paying off in other ways. Recently, Zoo Atlanta garnered regional acclaim when it was rated one of the best places to work in Atlanta. "Our goal is to make the top 10 and then the top five," Weston says.

Marcus Margerum: Marketing Outside the Box

Marcus Margerum is one of Zoo Atlanta's newest team members. He signed on a little more than a year and a half ago as vice president of marketing and sales. He originally came from a corporate marketing background with the Zyman Group, a management consulting firm. "I was seeking to make a career change," he recalls. "I enjoy marketing and brand management and wanted to apply what I knew to a different industry. The wonderful thing is marketing principles are transferable to different industries. Now I'm driving revenue, developing growth opportunities and creating strategies for the Zoo Atlanta brand."

With 40 percent of the Zoo's income dependent upon marketing, Margerum is responsible for meeting revenue objectives through sponsorships, group sales and general attendance.

"At the Zoo, I have incredibly varied days," he says. "One hour I might have a meeting with a curator to talk about the next exhibit and then in the next hour I'm talking to sponsors, and then working on tours for a project. It's very diverse. I can take a walk and get instant feedback on what's working and not working. On the [corporate] side we had to do focus groups to find that out."

Few zoos in the United States have a chance to experience the exhilaration and attention that comes with the birth of a baby giant panda in captivity. In late 2006, Margerum and his colleagues were fortunate enough with birth of Mei Lan. With an aggressive attendance target set for 2007, Zoo

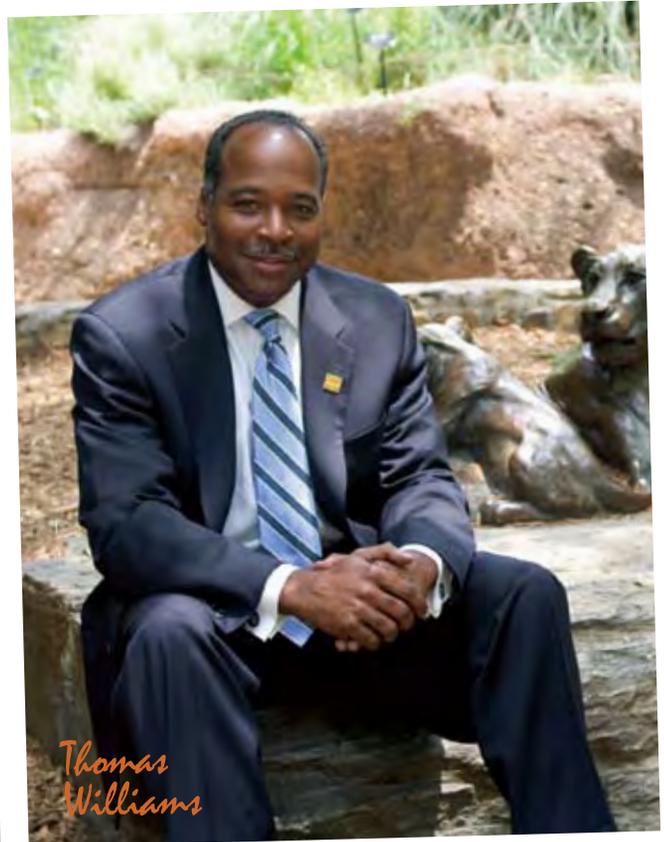
Atlanta initiated numerous strategies, including several marketing programs, and by the end of the year had increased attendance by 26 percent. As a cherry on top for a banner year, the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions recognized the Zoo's 2007 television advertising campaign with a Brass Ring Award — a first for the oldest park in Atlanta (established in 1889).

Risk-taking and ingenuity, coupled with a healthy dose of creativity, have empowered Margerum to implement marketing tactics not often associated with a zoo. Take for instance the new Zoo Atlanta gift card. A consumer can walk into just about any retail outlet and purchase a gift card these days, but that's not often the case with cultural institutions. As of last June, Zoo Atlanta gift cards were made available in 170 Atlanta Kroger stores. And to date, Zoo Atlanta is the only Atlanta cultural institution to offer a gift card option. "We are breaking new ground. There are lots of opportunities to do new things here at Zoo Atlanta, new ways to market and generate growth," says Margerum, originally from Chicago, and a graduate of Hampton University and Clark Atlanta University.

Margerum believes the door is wide open for minorities interested in careers with zoos, aquariums and other cultural institutions. "I don't think it's an industry we seek out but there are lots of opportunities in multiple disciplines for us to explore," he says. "And in Atlanta, with its large African American population, we should be involved in all aspects of the community. We are strong in politics here, but we need a presence in hospitality and at cultural institutions."

Thomas Williams: Championing Access for All

Politics is practically a family profession for Thomas Williams, vice president of government relations and community affairs. In his hometown of Thomasville, Ga., Williams' father was a member of the city council and served as Thomasville's first African-American mayor. Williams' own political career includes stints as statewide senior special assistant to U.S. Senator Max Cleland and field representative for Congressman Sanford Bishop. He brought his political expertise to Zoo Atlanta in 2004. Since then, "My job has taught me how to build bridges with community organizations," he says. "Also it has given me great insight on what federal, state and local elected officials expect from a zoological institution."



Thomas Williams

Behind the Scenes

Those expectations, he explains, include the Zoo's role as an education and conservation organization in the community, and its economic impact on Atlanta and state of Georgia. Privatized in 1985 and owned by the City of Atlanta, the Zoo's revenue in 2007 was \$18,527,000. "In general, zoos add a cultural fabric to any big city," adds Williams. "Part of our role in government relations is to bestow all those virtues of Zoo Atlanta to federal, state and city officials."

Hines-Davis describes Williams as a true champion for providing access to the Zoo. "From a political point of view, it's about reaching out to all segments of our community, locally as well as globally," observes Williams, who earned a bachelor of science in political science from Fort Valley State University. Specifically, Zoo Atlanta has a global impact on conservation projects on three continents (Asia, Africa and South America). "Locally, we must be just as concerned about the communities that surround us. Through community affairs, we are providing access to persons who can't afford to attend the Zoo."

Williams brings new audiences to the Zoo through partnerships with Fulton County, the City of Atlanta, VSA arts of Georgia and local congregations. A collaboration with the Atlanta Housing Authority, now in its third year, offers internships to graduating high school seniors interested in veterinary medicine and zoology.

New introductions also involve vendors and suppliers. Williams, Burgess, Hines-Davis, Weston and Margerum have each had a critical role in developing the Zoo's vendor/supplier diversity network. Joining with Georgia Minority Supplier Development Council, Atlanta Business League and the City of Atlanta, Zoo Atlanta held a vendor fair in May that brought in more than 40 suppliers to talk potential business with purchasers from different departments.

On the public affairs side, Williams worked closely with Mayor Shirley Franklin's office on a \$21.8 million bond issue awarded in 2007 that went toward retiring the Zoo's debt and funding capital projects over the next 20 years. He adds, "Members of the Fulton County Commission, Atlanta City Council, and Mayor Franklin and her staff have been extremely supportive in their efforts to maintain a world-class zoo."

"My dad taught me early to believe in the political process because good things happen when good people get involved," he continues. "That's the essence of how we operate. We reach across party lines. Everybody loves the zoo, whether you are a Democrat, Independent, Libertarian or Republican. That is one of the refreshing things about this job — there is a common thread that unites everybody of different political persuasions and backgrounds. They have an appreciation and admiration for Zoo Atlanta. We have been very fortunate in that regard." **AT**



Lori Perkins: Bringing Order to the Wild

Lori Perkins is no ordinary senior manager — her direct reports manage hundreds of wild animals. As Zoo Atlanta's director of animal programs, Perkins oversees all of the institution's animal care departments — a leadership role that enables her to exercise the variety of skills and interests she has acquired over an impressive 20 years in the zoological industry.

Perkins, who holds bachelor's and master's degrees in experimental psychology, is uniquely positioned to make a

difference not only to the care and study of animals, but also to the professional growth and development of the people who serve as their stewards.

"My job has me involved in everything from animal management to exhibit design to writing," Perkins says. "But I also enjoy the opportunity to support and encourage a diverse group of people with different experiences, different backgrounds and different ideas on taking the Zoo's mission to the next level."



June Wilson: Ensuring Safety and Security

To some, June Wilson's job might seem an unusual application of an extensive background in security and loss prevention, but Zoo Atlanta's senior director of operations believes she has found the perfect niche. Wilson, who holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice, worked in corporate and retail security before joining Atlanta's wildest workforce eight years ago.

For Wilson, the novelty of a workplace inhabited by gorillas and giant pandas has yet to

wear away. Still, while she enjoys the Zoo's full-time residents, people are her priority. After all, as supervisor of the Zoo's security, admissions, rides and attractions, and grounds quality departments, she is directly responsible for the safety and enjoyment of 700,000 guests annually.

"I like that I encounter so many different types of visitors from such a broad sector of the community," Wilson says. "I'm proud to contribute to their experience while they're here."