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ADVANCING

Meeting Challenges Head On

Birgit Smith Burton reflects on her time as AFP Global Board chair



A Greater Impact



Birgit Smith Burton reflects on her past two years as chair of the AFP Global Board and her continuing work in racial equity.

By Thomas A. Barstow

Birgit Smith Burton still remembers her first meeting with a local chapter of AFP Global in Western New York in the late 1980s; it was unfriendly and discouraging. After she signed in for the event, no one sought her out to chat or to make her feel welcomed.

The experience soured Burton on AFP, then known as the National Society of Fund Raising Executives before rebranding in 2001. "They didn't make me feel welcome. Nobody spoke to me. I wasn't invited to sit at a table," she says. "And when I left that meeting, I never went back to another meeting hosted by that chapter."

She would have a similar experience after moving from New York to the Atlanta area to continue her fundraising career. But a mentor encouraged her to stay with the organization. Decades later, Burton would be at the top of AFP, serving as chair of the AFP Global Board for the past two years. And those experiences from early on in her career now shape the guidance she gives to organizations grappling with expanding their appeal to people of color.

"In being a leader, I see it as my job to lift up the voices of those who are marginalized," she says. "AFP needs to do better. This is my mission because it is my lived experience."

PATH TO LEADERSHIP

Mentors have always helped Burton to persevere when she needed to push ahead and to let go when that was important, too. For example, as a child, Burton wanted to be a performer and was accepted into a musical theater program at the State University of New York in Fredonia, south of Buffalo. After her freshman year, her advisor pulled her aside and suggested she should consider a different career path.

"He said it wasn't because I lacked talent but because, being Black, it wasn't going to be an easy career," she says. "I would be competing for roles that might be traditionally for someone white, and I would find myself experiencing many disappointments."

She would later look back and realize that her advisor was working through his own obstacles as a gay man in 1980 and that his guidance was well intended. Through that lens, she sees the conversation as an example of what she would spend her professional life pursuing—ways to ensure that people would never have to have those conversations and are accepted in their professions for who they are.

As she switched majors and began to study communications and broadcast journalism at Medaille College, she found fundraising—thanks to an internship with the United Negro College Fund in Buffalo where she would spend 11 years. At UNCF, she managed campaigns for the region, which included Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse. One of her responsibilities was running the local version of the Lou Rawls Parade of Stars telethon; she also oversaw major gifts and corporate and foundation campaigns.

Along the way, she worked with Jonathan Bush, the younger brother of former President George H.W. Bush. Jonathan Bush was deeply involved with UNCF on a national level, eventually suggesting that she connect with Georgia Tech when she decided to move to Atlanta. "He was a great person, and I got to know him," Burton says about Jonathan Bush. "The Bush family in Texas was very involved with UNCF. It went beyond politics."

In 1998, she started at Georgia Tech, where she rose through the ranks before retiring in December 2021 as executive director of foundation relations.

The welcome she first received at the AFP chapter in Atlanta wasn't much better than what she had experienced in New York years earlier. Still, her mentor, the late Charles R. Stevens, CFRE, encouraged her to stay with the organization. Stevens had served as the first Black chair of the AFP board in 1992 and 1993 when it was still the National Society of Fund Raising Executives.

"He really encouraged me to stay the course," she says. "Charles, who was from Atlanta, said, 'You have to be that person who helps pave the way and create inviting spaces. This is your calling, so don't be

discouraged and leave. The profession needs you.' And so I stayed."

Last year, during a speaking engagement at the AFP Western New York Chapter, Burton related her experiences, and the AFP leaders in attendance apologized for what had happened early in her career. She realized that many of them might not have been born when she first joined the group in the late 1980s, so they weren't responsible for the past and were doing amazing work to be inclusive and welcoming in bringing more diversity into their chapter and the profession, she says.

They told her they wanted to make up for her initial experiences. "And they did," Burton says, recalling the deep conversations and photos that were taken that day.

Burton would also become a mentor herself. Early on at Georgia Tech, she determined that there was a

lack of fundraisers of color at the institution and in the Atlanta area. That led her to become the founder of the African American Development Officers, to help support the fundraisers who were there and to help attract others. The AADO, where she is now CEO, achieved full nonprofit status about three years ago and provides development, education, employment support, networking, and mentorship opportunities for fundraisers of color.

SPREADING THE WORD

In 2014, on the invitation of then-board chair Bob Carter, a close friend of Stevens's, Burton became an AFP board member and a few years later was asked to chair the diversity and inclusion committee, the precursor to AFP's Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and



Advice for Fundraisers

Over the years, Birgit Smith Burton has developed insights into how to build a successful fundraising career. Here are just a few.

ENGAGE WITH NEW GENERATIONS

When doing projects, work groups that include people from various generations can help everyone grow professionally, Burton says. Older generations can get new ideas, and younger generations can learn from their experience.

"Do a project with younger generations. You realize what they offer, and they realize what you offer," she says. "I invite people to not be set in their ways and to embrace the diverse ways of doing things. Don't be so judgmental that we can't work together."

Generational stereotypes will evaporate, and everyone becomes a better fundraiser, she adds. "Why do you think Snoop Dogg all of a sudden at 50-something years old is everywhere? Young people discover that there's something valuable in what you know," she says. "At the same time, we need to be looking at the freshness and the

new ideas and the exciting ideas that are coming from the younger professionals."

EMBRACE CONTINUOUS LEARNING

New developments, such as advancements in artificial intelligence, need to be embraced, she says.

"Whether it's community-centric fundraising or donor-centric fundraising, be open to learning so that you can stay current," she says. "And know what's going on in the fundraising world."

GET TO KNOW PEOPLE

One of the biggest mistakes that fundraisers can make is to approach donations as transactional. "Fundraising is about relationships with teams and donors," she says. "When you can be open to that, it is a more enjoyable work environment."

Some people might want to give through social media or by mail or in person. The important thing is to know what individuals or organizations prefer. "It's donor by donor," she says. AP

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Access committee. "During that time, we established a new definition for our diversity and inclusion work to include equity and access," she says. "We worked as a team in redefining what diversity and inclusion would look like for AFP."

As her eight-year term limit approached as a board member, someone asked Burton to consider being nominated as chair. While reluctant at first, she decided to do so because she was encouraged by others who said the association needed someone with her background. While her mentor, Stevens, had been the first Black chair of AFP's predecessor organization, Alphonse Brown had been only the second Black chair when he held the office in 2005. Burton would be the first Black woman to hold the position. "It had been a long time since a person of color had chaired, so I agreed and I ran for chair," she says. "I really wanted to focus on increasing diversity within the membership of AFP and the profession."

Progress has been made since she started in fundraising decades ago, but the numbers are still low, with about 4% of AFP members identifying as Black and about 10% identifying as people of color, she says.

"I felt we weren't capturing all the people who are doing all the fundraising work because at small organizations, the people doing the fundraising may not have a fundraising title," she says. "So that's what I really wanted to focus on. How do we increase those numbers?"

AFP has about 26,000 members. However, the IRS has identified nearly two million nonprofit organizations. And if each has one fundraiser—knowing some have none and some have many—the potential for member growth is enormous, she says. Then there is the practical problem: As in other professions, fundraisers are retiring without enough new people following behind them. That means leaders must try to tap the passions of newer generations, while offering a supportive environment.

"I envision a profession where we can empower every professional, whether in a small or large organization, to dedicate their daily efforts to making a positive impact in our communities," she says. "Ultimately, it's all about supporting those who are committed to driving meaningful change."

ISSUES IN CANADA

As fate would have it, some of that work would be delayed. Early in Burton's tenure as chair, allegations resurfaced about anti-Black racism at the AFP chapter in Toronto, Canada. At that point, her primary goal was to guide the global board in addressing key issues and making impactful decisions that would set a positive example for the entire association.

Burton recognized that much work remained, particularly in creating safer spaces for Black fundraisers within AFP. The situation in Toronto illustrates how adversity can lead to the necessary steps that AFP chapters and members can take: to do vital work on equity, embrace a spirit of accountability, and acknowledge and apologize for the harm that has occurred so far.

As chair, Burton could call for task forces to examine specific areas. For example, a fair behavior task force looked into how AFP members could effectively file complaints or concerns about other members. The task force eventually became a standing committee—the Member Code of Conduct Committee—creating a process to examine concerns like the allegations of anti-Black racism raised in Toronto. AFP chapters depend upon volunteers to operate efficiently, so it is important that they know they have a platform to lodge concerns about other AFP volunteers or members if a situation arises, Burton explains. Sanctions can be implemented if violations are found, including revocation of AFP membership.

Meanwhile, in October, AFP in Canada released a statement saying that it would begin an audit of its Canadian operations for Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Access, and Anti-Racism. The audit was ordered because of the experiences of the Black fundraising leaders in Toronto. Their concerns brought attention to "systemic racism" within AFP in Canada and "more broadly throughout the sector," the statement says.

"The goal of the audit is to review the current state (including structure, policies, processes, and culture) and identify what the future could look like to better serve AFP in Canada," the statement continues.

"Recommendations based on the audit's findings will be made to AFP in Canada to serve as a roadmap for a path forward and to remove barriers for the existing and the next generation of leaders."

While audits have been done at the chapter level in Canada, the new initiative was a first on a national level. The IDEAA audit was sponsored by Burton as chair of AFP Global and co-sponsored by leadership at the AFP Foundation for Philanthropy-Canada and AFP Canada.

traveled 143,000 miles in 2023 and was on pace to meet or exceed that number in 2024. With the social unrest in recent years, especially since the murder of George Floyd in 2020, people want to hear from the Black woman who is leading a global nonprofit.

"So, I've been as far north as Newfoundland. I've been in Mexico. I've been to London and the Pacific Northwest," she says. "I've gone everywhere, and I have enjoyed every single minute of it."

It does not get fixed overnight. We are building on work that has been done over decades.

As chair, Burton also formed another task force that would examine the nominating process at AFP to offer better transparency about how the nominating committee operates when finding new leaders.

Despite those and other efforts, she adds, the work to shed light on any lingering bias will continue.

"It does not get fixed overnight," she says, pointing out that groups within the organization were looking at equity issues nearly 50 years ago. "We are building on work that has been done over decades. There is a lot of learning that has been taking place—learning about language and how we use it, and how we value identity and that people should have a sense of belonging. We have made some headway, but the journey is long."

She points out that she has seen some positive changes—especially in her home chapter, the AFP Greater Atlanta Chapter. Today, when she goes to their meetings, maybe 25% or so are people of color. Along the way, she has continued to work to give back, such as helping to establish the Diversity Fellows Program and the Philanthropic Leader of Tomorrow Award, which is presented during the chapter's National Philanthropy Day Program.

"I have hope for AFP, but the clock is ticking," she says. "AFP needs to be very focused on how we treat our members with all types of representation."

Her experiences have continually led to speaking engagements, and she estimates that she

After she ends her two years as chair, she intends to continue speaking and writing. "Even though I will not be presenting as the chair, I will be presenting as a professional who cares about the fundraising profession," Burton says. "And I will write truthfully and honestly about my journey. I do not intend to throw anybody under the bus. But, when I look back on my career, I realize that I experienced racism that I kept from entering my psyche because I had work to do."

She recalls an example around 1999 when an elderly graduate from Georgia Tech commented on missing the "good ol' days" when Black people and women weren't at the college. "So, there are some things that I want to write about that will be helpful to me but also helpful to others," she says. "I've been fortunate in many ways, but there have been things that have impacted that journey."

Reflecting on the beginning of her journey and her conversation with her college advisor, she expresses her gratitude.

"I don't regret his encouragement to step away from acting because I feel I've made a greater impact in the philanthropic community," she says. "And who knows? I might return to the theater someday—there are certainly roles for curvy, senior Black women out there." 

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