

Meet the **25** most influential
people in Manatee today.

Power Players

By Molly McCartney

What makes one person powerful and another not so much? A big title and a fat salary help, but they're hardly the whole story. Some big suits don't venture far out of the office, while others with smaller job descriptions exert an influence way above their pay grade. As we sifted through scores of names to choose the real powers in Manatee County today, we came to the conclusion that power belongs to those who make things happen.

These are the people you turn to when you need action, the ones whose phone calls you'll always take. By and large, our power players are respected, not feared, and their names exude credibility. Whether we know them or not, these men and women shape much of our lives, from how we educate our children to where we build houses, attract businesses, improve roads, decide who will run for office and whose agenda gets attention—and gets funded with our money.

To arrive at our final list, we polled insiders and community leaders, collected copious notes and held some vigorous discussions. If you've lived in or done business in Manatee County for much time, you will recognize many of the names. And that may say as much about the county as the people on the list.

This is not a place where newcomers shoot to the top. The establishment has been in place for a long time here; certain family names carry considerable weight, and deep roots and traditional values matter. We still have something of a good-old-boy network calling many of the shots, and it can be tricky for a woman, a member of a minority, or someone young and new to break through.

Any list like this is bound to be subjective, and we expect we'll hear some arguments about our final choices. But before you get too steamed up about some of our inclusions—or omissions—let us ask you this: Would you ignore the calls of any of these 25? ➔



Bob Bartz In Manatee County, the chamber is central to business life, and that means the affable Bartz, president of the 2,400-member Manatee Chamber of Commerce for 28 years, has a permanent seat at the power table. Over the decades, Bartz has been quick to see opportunities, develop deep relationships in business and politics and convince business leaders to serve on his boards. Get his support for any significant business initiative and you're halfway there.



State Sen. Michael S. (Mike) Bennett

Gregarious and outspoken, Bennett represents a district that includes most of Manatee County. No one seeks Republican office—or influence—in this Republican-dominated county without going to this former electrical contractor. “He’s not afraid to break eggs,” says one businessman. “He’s frank, fun and savvy as heck.” A

business champion who’s had setbacks with his own commercial investments recently, Bennett has alienated slow-growth proponents even while championing alternative energy solutions in Florida.



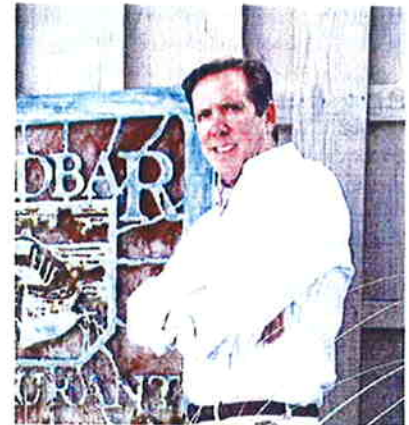
Dr. Gwendolyn Y. Brown

If you want to reach the local black community, go to Manatee County Commissioner Brown. “She doesn’t say a lot, but when she does talk, she tells it like it is, even if it’s something you don’t want to hear,” says one colleague. Well-regarded in the business community, Brown, who teaches early child education at State College of Florida, is the only Democrat on the seven-person commission and served in 2009 as its first black chairman.



Rose Carlson A graduate of

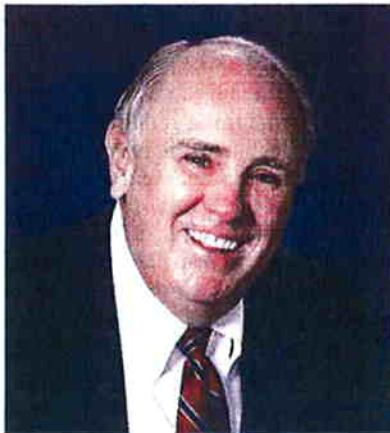
Manatee High School and the University of Texas, Carlson got homesick after graduation and moved back to Bradenton, taking “the first job that came along” at the small cable TV operation now known as Bright House Networks-Manatee because “it was a paycheck.” Within a few years she was named vice president and general manager and 35 years later still holds that title, having survived half a dozen mergers and acquisitions. Active on community boards, she’s vice president of the new Manatee Tiger Bay Club.



Ed Chiles Son of the late Florida Gov. and U.S. Sen. Lawton Chiles, Ed Chiles is a rare Democratic power in Manatee. Tall, handsome and sociable with a sly sense of humor, he’s built a mini-empire of waterfront restaurants and real estate developments on Anna Maria Island and helped launch a burgeoning wedding destination industry there. He’s also heavily involved in politics and community service; he and his mother, Rhea, were recently named Islanders of the Year by Anna Maria’s *The Islander* newspaper.



Moody Chisholm Chief executive officer since October 2006 of the Manatee Healthcare System, which includes Manatee Memorial Hospital and Lakewood Ranch Medical Center, Chisholm is a central figure in any local healthcare discussion, including ways to attract quality healthcare professionals. "He works and plays well with others; I've seen him put community ahead of the hospital when it comes to indigent care," says one insider. "Moody does the right thing, even if it is unpopular," says a former colleague.



Bob Christopher Viewed as a member of Manatee's old and new guard, Christopher is the C in Manatee's leading accounting firm, CS&L. "Bob is not all about Bob," says one longtime friend. "He is the epitome of civility and kindness." A founding member of the 12-year-old Manatee Community Foundation, he serves on its advisory board and often

opens his home for its annual LobsterFest. His latest assignment: treasurer of the Manatee Tiger Bay Club, which presents nonpartisan programs on political and social issues.

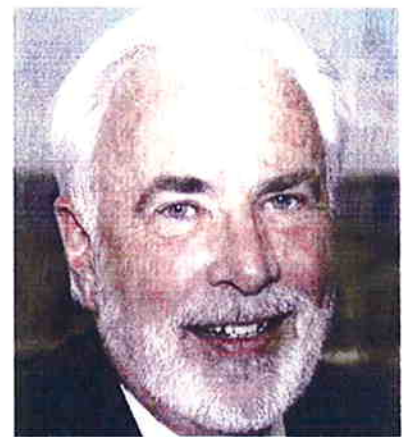


Cesar Gomez Young, energetic and upbeat Gomez, executive director of the Gulf Coast Latin Chamber of Commerce, is the highly visible leader of Manatee County's Latino business community. A former commercial law and human rights lawyer in his native Bogotá, Colombia, Gomez has increased his chamber's membership from 60 members to 250 in the last two years, expanded its events and built smart connections to the non-Latino business community.



Dr. Lars Hafner The new president of State College of Florida, Hafner began shaking things up as soon as he arrived in 2008. A former Florida legislator, Hafner quickly

lined up the support to expand his school (formerly Manatee Community College) to a four-year baccalaureate program and then changed the school's name, angering some locals who wanted Manatee to be front and center in the name and USF officials who see SCF as a turf invasion. Now he's opening a Medical Technology & Simulation Center and the nation's first collegiate middle/high school. As a guy who gets things done at the cross section of business and education, Hafner cannot be ignored.



Ed Hunzeker Forget the stereotype of the uncooperative government bureaucrat. Hunzeker, Manatee County Administrator since January 2007, quickly became known for cutting through red tape and keeping government out of the way of business. Collaborative and decisive, Hunzeker "listens and has the trust of the business community," says an observer. Plus, he knows his bosses—the Manatee County Commissioners—and how to keep them happy. Anyone who needs to work with government needs to keep Hunzeker on his side.



Rex Jensen The blunt and sometimes combative Jensen is CEO of the 30,000-acre Schroeder-Manatee Ranch, which includes the enormous Lakewood Ranch community and about 30 subsidiaries. "If you want to do anything countywide, you need Lakewood Ranch, and that means Rex," says one insider. Jensen, who has a law degree in addition to his background in real estate development, has been with SMR for 20 years and is the driver behind its growth and success. Says one former colleague, "He's the smartest man in three counties."



Stephen M. Knopik Unflappable and understated, with a passion for helping kids, especially those at the Palmetto Youth Center near his corporate office, Knopik is CEO of Bealls Inc., the privately held

Manatee-based family business that began in 1915 with The Dollar Limit and today includes 85 Florida department stores as well as 437 outlet stores, 241 of them in Florida. Annual revenues are more than \$1 billion. Knopik was named the firm's first non-family CEO in 2007 and is keeping the company growing, opening 18 more stores so far this year.



David L. McDonald McDonald, the executive director of the Manatee County Port Authority, has emerged as a critical player in Manatee County's future economy, with a key role in the fast-growing sector of overseas trade. For 18 years, he's led one of Florida's largest and fastest-growing deepwater seaports, estimated to have a \$2.3 billion economic impact and supporting more than 20,000 jobs. McDonald has expanded the port into container shipping, and the port will soon be the site of a second underground natural gas pipeline.



Hugh E. McGuire Jr. Sixth-generation Manatee County resident and a big booster of his hometown, Parrish, Hugh McGuire Jr. is a low-key operator with his fingers in a range of community activities. An attorney with Harrison, Kirkland, Pratt, he chairs the North County Partnership, a group of 22 influential developers who help plan and construct infrastructure in the North County area. He's also chair of the Parrish Foundation, which leases the renovated 90-year-old Parrish School House—where McGuire once attended elementary school—as a community center and home for the Parrish branch of the YWCA.



John McKay An influential former Florida Senate president, McKay still has lots of clout at home. A real estate developer and broker, he recently launched a company to help banks with distressed properties, but that hasn't distracted him from public service. Serious and tenacious, he's fought for a state tax system with fewer exemptions, helped put the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art under the umbrella of Florida State University and championed last year's successful Ringling International Arts Festival, persuading Manatee and Sarasota counties to pony up some substantial funds for a repeat in 2010.