

## **Volunteers Mike Ford and Claire Smith keep MAS growing**

*By Rick Maier*

This is the story of two people – Claire and Mike - who have done remarkable things during challenging times at one of my favorite community organizations, the Museum of Arts and Sciences. They offered a helping hand, but soon became totally immersed in many important and time-consuming matters.

It all started last year when Claire Smith agreed to become volunteer board president a few months early when Willie Palmer was transferred to Atlanta. Then in October, the paid executive director, Michael Brothers, left to run a bigger museum in Florida.

Long-term Museum supporter Robbo Hatcher stepped in to lead the search committee, and suggested that Mike Ford, a friend and the retired CFO of Charter Medical, serve as interim director.

Mike accepted with two conditions: that he receive no pay, and that he not be asked to stay as the permanent leader. His arrival made my job as volunteer treasurer much easier because Mike is one of the most seasoned, successful financial executives in Middle Georgia.

The challenges kept building - individuals and corporations cut back on contributions, local governments reduced their support and endowment earnings slumped. Also, once Claire and Mike got involved in the day-to-day operations, they found a few administrative conditions that needed attention.

Thank goodness Claire and Mike were in position to tackle these demands.

### The Venus and Mars alignment

Claire McCommon Smith is a very proper, longtime Maconite who has been associated with the arts and the Museum most of her life. Mother to a daughter who just graduated from Yale and a son who is a junior at Wake Forest, she is married to Boone Smith, a highly regarded attorney in Macon.

Claire took time away from her own antique store business, and Boone put his home life on hold as Claire attended many meetings and functions on behalf of the Museum. “The worst times were the evenings spent studying those complicated financial reports. I’ll be glad to have her back when her term ends in July,” Boone says.

Mike Ford is a savvy corporate executive who spent little time in museums before becoming acting director. He knows how to run organizations, but until recently, never

thought much about planetarium star machines, attending local government budget hearings or keeping tropical birds healthy.

Originally from Tennessee, Mike stays active in several personal business ventures while working on his golf game. “Now that our sons are grown, we enjoy traveling and spending time outdoors,” says wife Nancy. “Mike’s heart bypass surgery this past December set him back a few weeks, but he’s back stronger than ever now.”

One of the things that make Mike and Claire such a great team is their complementary approach to issues. Claire always has something nice to say; Mike would rather listen and observe. Claire always finds humor in things; Mike believes that “sometimes you’re the statue, sometimes you’re the pigeon.”

“Claire is level headed and calm no matter how tough things get,” says Development Director Debbie Smith. “Mike dreams of IMAX theaters and Chattanooga-sized aquariums.”

Mike will return to active retirement when a new director is hired in the next few weeks. Claire will hand the gavel over to the next volunteer president – none other than the Telegraph’s own Charles Richardson.

The leadership of Claire and Mike has helped the very talented and hard working staff at the Museum achieve many successes in the past few months - special state funding, a large museum foundation grant, taking possession of a world-class sculpture, expanding the property to create more green space, and making arrangements for the Titanic exhibit in 2004.

Under Mike and Claire, the Museum hasn’t just kept going, it’s kept growing.