

BUSINESS

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THE RIGHT TOUCH

Meet Robin Reiter-Faragalli, the co-chair of Miami-Dade's WAGES board. She has made a career of putting people together and making things happen. Described as tough-minded and determined, pure-hearted and generous, Reiter-Faragalli is a consensus builder dedicated to making her home a better place.



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WORKING WISDOM
STUDENT'S PLAN
EMPOWERS WORKERS

TECHNOLOGY
FREE-MARKET FORCES
GET A BUSY SIGNAL

Described as tough-minded and determined, pure-hearted and generous, Robin Reiter-Faragalli is a consensus builder dedicated to making Miami-Dade a better place.

THE REITER TOUCH

Story by MIMI WHITEFIELD

Photos by CHUCK FADELY

When Robin Reiter was 7, she climbed aboard a public bus in North Miami — by herself — because she was determined to attend theater classes at Coral Gables' old Merry-go-round Playhouse. At 18, she was voted the student who had "done the most" for North Miami High.

Both are telling indicators of the woman Robin Reiter would become. She was an off-Broadway actress, a voice and speech instructor in New York, the first female announcer hired by the Miami Seaquarium. And at 27, she started her second career as the youngest director of a corporate foundation in the United States.

Since 1980 when she was tapped to create Southeast Banking Corp. Foundation — which was a guiding force in the Florida arts community for

more than a decade — she has single-mindedly taken on causes and initiatives to benefit South Florida.

Reiter-Faragalli, who took on the hyphenated last name when she married Frank Faragalli in 1978, doesn't hesitate to accept a new challenge — whether it's spearheading educational projects for the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, encouraging promising arts organizations, or co-chairing the local welfare-to-work board, the Miami-Dade/Monroe WAGES Coalition.

Sandwiched between all her community activities, Reiter-Faragalli juggles her real job as senior vice president and executive director of the BankAtlantic Foundation, coordinating and making decisions on the \$350,000 the foundation distributes annually.

Her boss Alan Levan, chairman of BankAtlantic, calls her "a resource, a gift to the community," and says he's happy to

allow her to devote time during the work week to community projects.

"There are some companies that can donate millions every year for nonprofit activities — and some day we hope to be in that category," Levan said. "But through Robin's efforts we sometimes provide a resource far greater than funding to the community."

Overarching all of Reiter-Faragalli's activities is a deep love for the community she grew up in and a desire to make it a better place. "I love South Florida. It has a fabulous past and a wonderful future," she said.

'A worker'

Now, at age 46, she also chairs the Miami-Dade board for the South Florida Annenberg Challenge, a \$100 million matching grant program to improve education, and serves as chairwoman of the Greater Miami Local Initiative Support Corp., which works to bring affordable



MAKING HER POINT: When Robin Reiter-Faragalli presides over a WAGES meeting, as she did one recent day, she's 'not afraid to ruffle feathers if it will get us where we need to go.'

housing and economic development to poor neighborhoods.

Recently, she accepted a new Chamber assignment: vice chair of the regional affairs committee, whose mission is to explore greater cooperation in the four-county area.

"Some people take on these assignments just to add to their resumes," but Robin is a worker, said Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas, who is the other co-chair of the WAGES Coalition.

Spring Reiter-Faragalli in action is a bit like watching a well-orchestrated play. She is

constantly racing between Point A and Point B, taking phone calls in her Fort Lauderdale office in the morning, rushing to Miami for a WAGES meeting, then perhaps heading back to Broward County for a meeting with an economic development agency.

It was her theater training, she said, that set the course for the rest of her life: "If you can dissect a script, direct a play, you can do anything."

Now she chairs a meeting with aplomb, mingles easily at a business luncheon, coaches representatives from nonprofit

organizations on how to access funds, and networks constantly — putting people and ideas together.

Still, she doesn't view herself as particularly outgoing: "I was determined rather than outgoing as a child. I think I'm still more determined than outgoing. I'm basically a pretty self-contained person."

Loosing weight, gaining power

Indeed, many of her efforts have been behind the scenes. She is a private person who doesn't seek the limelight for herself. What matters to her is

week on welfare reform — all as an unpaid volunteer — and working 30 hours weekly at the BankAtlantic Foundation.

Since last November, she has lost 30 pounds. She jokingly calls it the WAGES diet. With so many missed meals, and running around to meetings, the pounds just fell off.

Now, she's cut back to about 20 hours a week of welfare reform work. "Before an executive director [Brian Fleming] was hired, Robin was running the WAGES Coalition on a day-to-day basis," Penelas said. "Her leadership freed me to do the public advocacy work on welfare reform. Otherwise, I'd be spending 30 to 40 percent more time on WAGES issues."

'A place at the table'

It was Reiter-Faragalli, Penelas said, who came to see him shortly after the state Legislature voted to overhaul the welfare system in October 1996, saying that the local board that would oversee the welfare effort needed to be independent and have private-sector representation. "She said that since they were the ones who were going to be providing the jobs, they needed a place at the table," Penelas said.

At that time, there were more than 40,000 Miami-Dade welfare recipients in need of jobs in a local economy that was producing only 15,000 to 20,000 new jobs annually. The adult welfare caseload has now been reduced to 21,685, but those who have exhausted their welfare time limits will begin losing their checks Oct. 1.

The WAGES Coalition that has evolved is an independent public/private partnership, but it has "been without growing pains."

As the public persona of a group intent on changing a welfare system that has grown up during the past 60 years, Reiter-Faragalli has taken her share of potshots from state labor and social-service officials.

She really doesn't care. Reiter-Faragalli says she no longer has patience for turf wars or clashes over which job training or placement agency will get the biggest share of the welfare pie. It should be the provider who

best delivers jobs, she says.

"It is the sole mission of a provider to find jobs for people who are going to lose their benefits. I have no patience any more for side issues," she said. "I'm not afraid to ruffle feathers if it will get us where we need to go."

Reiter-Faragalli insisted from the beginning that contracts with the WAGES Coalition be performance-based so that service providers wouldn't get their final payment until a client has been in a job for six months. Before, she said, the welfare industry was predicated on the fact that there are "poor people who need services, so let's keep them poor so we can continue to provide services."

That kind of directness is a Reiter-Faragalli hallmark. "She's a tough advocate. If she understands an issue, don't get in her way," Penelas said. "I've seen her involved in some of these dust-ups, and she puts people to bed pretty quickly if they're on shaky ground with the facts."

"Robin is forceful, determined, very positive and right to the point. I admire her style," said Frank Nero, president of the Beacon Council, Miami-Dade's economic development

arm. "She has no political axes to grind, no hidden agendas as far as I can tell, and she's into this for all the right reasons."

At one early WAGES meeting, a participant suggested that the WAGES Coalition was made up of rich white people. Reiter-Faragalli took offense at the notion: "There are single parents on the board, former welfare recipients. My own parents were people of modest means. The only difference is we didn't know we were poor. It wasn't an issue."

School lessons, part one

Reiter-Faragalli grew up in the 1950s and 1960s in North Miami. One of four siblings, she had a flair for the dramatic. Her first paying job came at age 8 when she dubbed the voice of Tom Thumb into English from a series of Spanish films.

And she traces her activism back to the tumultuous school year of 1968-69, when Dade public schools were being integrated. The School Board decided to transfer students from all grades to achieve racial integration.

"A group of us from the Association of Student Councils

PLEASE SEE REITER, 20



TOO PLUS TWO: Too is the name of the beloved pooch in the Morningtide home Robin Reiter-Faragalli and her husband Frank Faragalli share.



Robin Reiter-Faragalli

Professional Senior vice president and executive director of the BankAtlantic Foundation, 1994-present. Board member, Atlantic Southern Insurance Co., Puerto Rico. Independent consultant in philanthropy, community and economic development and political and civic affairs.

1991-94.

Vice president of corporate community involvement and executive director, Southeast Banking Corp. Foundation, 1980-91.

First career Actress. At age 8 was the voice of Tom Thumb on a series of Spanish-language children's movies that were dubbed into English. At 20, she was a singer-actress at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland. Taught voice part

time at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York and worked in off-Broadway productions.

Education North Miami Senior High, Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh, where she majored in theater arts.

Community Activities Community Activities; Co-Chair of the Dade-Monroe WAGES Coalition; chair of the Miami-

Dade board for the Annenberg Challenge; chair of the Local Initiative Support Corp. (LISC); member of the executive committee and board of governors of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce; chair, Chamber Regional Committee; member of the board of the I.C.W.I. Group Foundation in Jamaica; non-lawyer director of the Florida Bar Foundation.

Formerly, chair of the Dade County Public Schools Blue Ribbon Committee; treasurer,

Council of Foundations; chair of the State Theatre Board of Florida; chair of the Florida Foundation Group, chair of the Donors Forum.

Personal Age 46. Born at Doctor's Hospital; grew up in North Miami. In her early career, people assumed Robin was a man's name. "To this day, my birth certificate says 'male.'" Female was penciled in over the error when she was a baby. Married to Frank

Faragalli. The couple lives in Miami's Morningtide section in a 1926 Mediterranean revival home with their dog Too.

Hobbies Reading, horseback riding, collecting antiques with her husband, driving fast. Received racing car lessons as a birthday gift from her husband. "A treasure. The best gift I ever received."

Point of it all: 'helping people'

By **MINI WHITEFIELD**
Herald Business Writer

Robin Reiter-Faragalli is not a linear person. Any one whose interests range from the arts and philanthropy to education, economic development and welfare reform couldn't be.

"My life has been a series of circular adventures — fabulously interesting, never dull. One thing has always led to another," she said. "For me, the quickest point to another point has never been a straight line, but circles. You just keep going up the spiral."

Even though it may seem that Reiter-Faragalli's passions have been disparate, she says, in her mind, they're all connected: "I believe there's a synergy between philanthropy and welfare reform. Philanthropy is about helping people, and welfare is an extension of that."

Here's a look at Reiter-Faragalli's views on some of the topics that interest her most:

■ **Welfare Reform:** "Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night wondering how we're going to do this. But one night it occurred to me at 2 a.m., the hardship exemption (it extends cash benefits up to one year for those with criminal records, limited education, no work experience or other problems that make it difficult to get a job.) That will at least buy time for some people."

Welfare reform simply must work in Miami-Dade, she says. If it doesn't work, "People will get very hungry and homeless. There will be more crime, more frustration and a deeper divide in this community between those who have and have not,

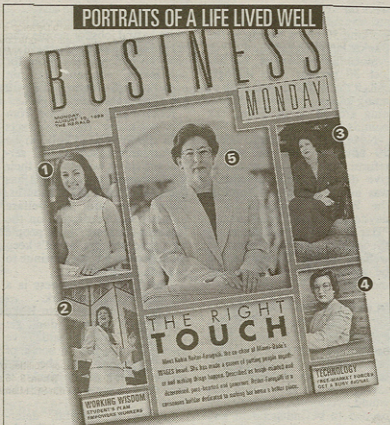
Call her Farmer Reiter: She helped plant seeds for arts community

By **MINI WHITEFIELD**
Herald Business Writer

Robin Reiter-Faragalli's dream job — creating the Southeast Banking Corp. Foundation — came about quite unexpectedly.

While working for the Dade County Council of Arts & Sciences, she did a project at Jackson Memorial Hospital's Burn Center that involved teaching patients ceramics as a form of therapy.

Her work, funded by Southeast, impressed Louis Hector, who set on the Southeast board and recommended her to bank executives thinking about starting a foundation to better chan-



1 The play was the thing for Robin Reiter in 1970 at the age of 18.

2 Reiter-Faragalli's generous spirit rose as high as the Southeast Bank tower in downtown Miami during the 1980s.

3 When First Union took over Southeast in 1991, Reiter-Faragalli found herself on the outside looking in — and jobless.

4 As Southeast's emissary of giving, Reiter-Faragalli had a vision, and a room with a view, in 1986.

5 Today, Reiter-Faragalli juggles her role as chief of the board overseeing the welfare-to-work initiative in Miami-Dade and Monroe counties with her career as executive director of the BankAtlantic Foundation.

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and this is just not acceptable to me. People on welfare want a life, just like everyone else, and I'm not letting go until I'm done with this."

■ **Philanthropy:** "Southeast was one of the first corporate foundations to look at public policy issues as important to the growth and development of the state. At BankAtlantic Foundation on a smaller scale, we're looking at those same issues that

push the public policy envelope."

■ **Community Building:** "To encourage economic development, the community needs to rally, pick a target and really take aim at that target. And it needs to be consistent and take a long view. I've always taken a holistic approach. I don't think you can ever be really successful if you build isolated units of success."

nel the bank's charitable giving.

Harry "Hood Bassett (the late chairman of Southeast Bank) told me, I'm not looking for a banker, but for someone who knows the community and can identify how to make it better," Reiter-Faragalli said.

So at 27, she set out to create a foundation — a prospect Reiter-Faragalli says she didn't find at all daunting. "I knew exactly what I would do first — meet with the biggest foundations in New York and find out what they did," she said.

Over the next few years, Reiter-Faragalli turned the Southeast Foundation into the bank's high-profile philanthropic arm

and took a special interest in promoting the arts.

"She particularly wanted to create a home-based arts scene. That's not to say that 25 years there wasn't culture here, but it was imported," said Bob Hosmon, associate dean of the University of Miami School of Communications.

One of her most significant contributions was helping organize an arts summit funded by the Southeast Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation in 1985. Under discussion: Florida's "cultural environment" in the 1990s. Among other things, the seed for the creation of the Miami City Ballet was planted at that meeting.

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went to the School Board and said, you can't do this to high-school seniors; they have established relationships at their schools; it isn't fair to anyone — black or white — to have to change schools the last year of high school," Reiter-Faragalli said. "The School Board was stunned, but they did change their plans."

"That experience made a difference in my life. It taught me that you will be listened to if you are organized."

In high school, she wrote that her lifetime ambition was "to become a good actress." Intent on that goal, she applied to and was accepted by Carnegie Tech, which took just 20 freshmen theater arts students a year.

Banker Adolfo Henriques, who has known her since the early 1980s, said Reiter-Faragalli's theater background manifests itself today "in the way she articulates things. She puts her arms around a complicated topic that everyone is discussing in circles and quickly brings it to a point of issues."

After graduation, she taught in New York at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and appeared in off-Broadway productions. But she hated the cold and the lifestyle in New York and came home.

With her return to South Florida came marriage to Faragalli, who is an executive assistant to the Miami-Dade Parks & Recreation director. The couple met at a softball game at Crandon Park and now share a 1926 Mediterranean Revival home in Miami's Morningside section, complete with a false wall they believe may have once been a bootlegger's hideaway. It's furnished with antiques and an extensive collection of Kensington, Art Deco aluminum ware collected by the couple have collected for years.

Though Reiter-Faragalli has

been one of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce's most active members for nearly two decades, it was her leadership of the Education Committee that really left a mark, said Chamber President Bill Cullom.

"She has a real passion for education," Henriques said. "Has become her ethic."

It was Reiter-Faragalli's idea, for example, to launch a workforce development program that included introduction of a job application portfolio, Cullom said. Schools work with graduating students to create portfolios, which contain grades and writing samples and are presented to prospective employers.

She started the Teacher of the Year luncheon, which through the years has grown from an event attended by about 60 people to one that now draws 3,000, and initiated the Chamber's Principal for the Day program, which puts business people in the shoes of a principal.

Reiter-Faragalli also chaired the Blue Ribbon Committee overseeing \$1 billion in capital improvements for Miami-Dade public schools, and was the force behind the Chamber's education summit in June.

"Many of the recommendations that grew out of that summit are being implemented today. Robin has ideas on so many things, and she is a really well-informed person. But first of all, she is extremely bright — as bright as anyone I have met in my life," Cullom said.

One local power broker suggested that her positions as WAGES co-chair and local chair of the Annenberg Challenge make Reiter-Faragalli a powerful woman who should wield her power more.

Told of the comment, Reiter-Faragalli seemed bemused: "This isn't about power; I view it as a privilege to have these positions," she said. "I look at it as being in a position where I'm able to make a change, rather than having power."

But the Southeast Foundation came to an abrupt end when federal regulators shut down the bank in 1991. First Union bought the remains and that September, Reiter-Faragalli learned she was out of a job after the liquidation. Remaining funds were distributed.

Through her role at Southeast, Reiter-Faragalli helped focus the arts community in a way that's missing today, Hosmon said. "She had the resources of Southeast plus her commitment and desire. Today, people might be more into their interests; are more fragmented."