

Donald A. Cheney and Civic Engagement: A Story Worth Telling  
Culture Quest Evening Reception  
Orange County Regional History Center, Orlando, Florida  
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By David A. Odahowski, President  
Edyth Bush Charitable Foundation, Inc

Good Evening, Everyone. My name is David A. Odahowski, President of the Edyth Bush Charitable Foundation. On behalf of H. Clifford Lee, Chairman of the Edyth Bush Charitable Foundation, and the entire board of Directors of the Foundation, I want to begin by thanking the Orlando Regional History Center for inviting the Foundation to be the presenting sponsor for its new permanent exhibit "Orlando Remembers" – an excellent exhibit that reflects the values of civic engagement that the Orange County Regional History Center exemplifies. Let me also take this opportunity to thank this evening's sponsor, Hughes Supply. The Hughes Supply Company's mission statement is: To supply outstanding service and solutions through dedication and excellence – that same mission statement could also be used for the personal commitment of the Hughes family to The City Beautiful. The Edyth Bush Charitable Foundation admires your civic engagement. I also want to take this opportunity to thank Bob Beatty, the Curator of Education here at the Orange County Regional History Center, for allowing me to read his Master's thesis on the history of building this History Center and for his patience in answering my incessant questions.

Let me also take this opportunity to acknowledge the two daughters of the founder of the Orange County Regional History Center, Virginia White and Barbara Cheney. Your father, as well as his father, and the entire Cheney family, represent the finest examples of civic engagement in the history of Orlando and maybe for all times. Just imagine Orlando with no YMCA, no Boy Scouts, no Rotary Club, no Great Oaks Village, no Orlando Utilities Commission, no History Center! If it were not for Donald A. Cheney, we might all be sitting in our living room tonight watching the *Antiques Roadshow* on PBS, or *History's Mysteries* on the History Channel. I have a funny feeling, however, that there might just be a few *Survivor:Guatamala* fans, or *Will and Grace*, or *The Apprentice* fans in this prestigious audience.

Donald A. Cheney also had a hand in the modern day success of Rollins College, the number one private college in the South, according to U.S. News and World Report. Mr. Cheney was an assistant to President Hamilton Holt, one of the great leaders of 20<sup>th</sup> Century higher education. Later, Donald Cheney was a trustee of Rollins College. After reading about the civic biography of Donald Cheney, his civic spirit at Rollins must somehow be present in the Rollins College Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership Center at his alma matter. Maybe the only activity of Donald Cheney that has not continued to this modern day, is the Rollins College Football team. Donald scored the wining touchdown against the University of Florida Gators in 1906! Go Tars!

I have been asked to speak to about Civic Engagement. What is it? Why is it important? Why will you be reading headlines and editorials about civic engagement in the next few weeks? What role does this organization have in Civic Engagement?

Let me first tell you what civic engagement is NOT! Civic engagement is NOT a new form of government-sponsored courtship for individuals. Civic Engagement is NOT the consolidation of the City of Orlando and Orange County governments. Civic engagement is NOT gridlock on I-4 – that’s civic enragement!

Civic engagement is about building community. It is the individual, collective, and organizational actions, like the one we are involved with here tonight, designed to promote the common good! Civic engagement is also voting, volunteering, ethnic celebrations, food drives, roadside beatification, more meetings at this beautiful History Center, and even those long drawn out neighborhood dramas, more commonly called homeowners association meetings – are all civic engagement! This act of community building, called civic engagement, is just like the house you and I live in – it must have a strong foundation and building blocks. The building blocks of civic engagement are sometimes called social capital.

In the next few weeks, you will be reading headlines and editorials about social capital in the Orlando Sentinel, on Channel 2 WESH TV, and across the community. The University of Central Florida, along with the YMCA and others, has commissioned a first-ever study on social capital in Central Florida. The study was conducted by the foremost expert on the subject, Robert Putnam, a Harvard Professor and author of Bowling Alone and BetterTogether, two of the seminal works on the subject of social capital. After tonight, you, as a knowledgeable, informed, and engaged group – with a high degree of social capital, I might add – will be able to talk intelligently about this subject when it comes up during the forthcoming holiday gatherings.

Robert Putnam, in his work Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, explains the definition and benefits of Social Capital as follows:

- Social capital refers to networks of social connections - doing things *with* people. Doing good for other people, however laudable, is not part of the definition of social capital.
- Social networks provide the channels through which we recruit one another for good deeds, and social networks foster norms of reciprocity that encourages attention to other's welfare.
- Social capital allows citizens to resolve collective problems more easily.
- Social capital greases the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly.
- Social capital improves our lot by widening our awareness of the many ways in which our fates are linked.

The Benefits of Social Capital Are Both Individual and Community Wide

- Research has shown that increased social capital can help make our lives healthier, safer, richer, and makes us better able to govern a just and stable democracy.
- Joining one group cuts your odds of dying over the next year in half. Joining two groups cuts it in quarter.
- Communities with higher levels of social capital produce children with higher SAT scores and higher performance on a broad range of testing.
- These same communities also have lower dropout rates, higher retention, and less youth violence.
- The more connected we are within our community, the more likely we are to have reduced incidences of a whole battery of health problems including colds, heart attacks, strokes, cancer, depression, and premature deaths of all sorts.
- Higher social capital correlates strongly with reduced murders and violent crimes on a neighborhood basis.
- Representative government is more responsive in communities with more social capital.
- Blood donations more abundant, and road rage is rarer where citizens are more involved in civic life.
- Measured happiness goes up when we are socially connected in mutually respectful, trusting relationships based on mutual exchange or reciprocity.
- Each 10 minutes of additional commuting time cuts all forms of social capital by 10 percent – 10 percent less church-going, 10 percent fewer club meetings, 10 percent fewer evenings with friends, etc.
- TV is the only leisure activity where doing more of it is associated with lower social capital.
- If you had to choose between 10% more cops on the beat or 10% more citizens knowing their neighbors' first names, the latter is a better crime prevention strategy.
- If you had to choose between 10% more teachers or 10% more parents being involved in their kids' education, the latter is a better route to educational achievement.
- Social capital is the best variable to successfully predict levels of tax compliance state-by-state.

A Harvard Business Review article makes the case that the more social capital you create, the better it is for business. Building social capital by creating and expanding mutually respectful relationships based on trust and reciprocity, will result in a greater ability to attract investment, create fewer unproductive controversies, and produce stronger, more enduring bottom line results. SunTrust knew about social capital years and years ago before the term, social capital, was coined. Litton Allen, one of the modern day founders of what is now SunTrust, instilled in his employees the idea that “you build your bank by building the community.”

So what does this have to do with the History Center? The History Center, because of its founder, Donald A. Cheney, is the General Motors of social capital production in all of Central Florida! This place, it's employees, it's patrons, and all of you make the History Center a social instrument – as Theodore Low, a pioneer in the museum education and

author of What is a Museum? describes. And this idea was not lost on Donald A. Cheney and what he said about the History Center:

“The history center should have a broad mission, a living center of historical information, research, study, collection and preservation of records, publications, of classes, group meetings a veritable educational and cultural institution, in service to the people of Orange County and Central Florida.”

Cheney said, “I hope that community volunteers would involve themselves and help the museum develop an “enriched program of public service and satisfying personal experience for all involved.” Now that all sounds like social capital to me! Donald A. Cheney must have been thinking about social capital when commenting about Orlando becoming a metropolitan center, of population, industry, of entertainment, and social life! He said, “People have been busy planning, building, and making money. Lest we gain the whole world but lose our own soul... should we not build for the cultural and spiritual growth of our community?”

In a few short moments we will hear four great stories about Donald A. Cheney and civic engagement. These stories will paint a picture in your mind and spark your further interest in Donald A. Cheney, and in this social instrument – the Orange County Regional History Center – and in our community. In many ways we all have some connection to Donald Cheney.

Let me conclude with a story about the Edyth Bush Charitable Foundation’s connection to Donald Cheney and how the children of this community, whom Mr. Cheney never knew, lead us to his legacy organization. About five years ago, with a promise of resources and of keeping the grownups at bay, the Edyth Bush Charitable Foundation put over a quarter of a million dollars into the hands of our young people to give them hands-on experience of finding solutions for the needs of our community. One of the very best grants made by this group of budding philanthropists, was to help the young people of Great Oaks Village. The funds were used to involve the children from Great Oaks with the Orange County Regional History Center. Well now you know the rest of the story. The civic engagement of one man is being forever renewed in the hearts and minds of young people from our community, through your civic engagement, and through this great History Center as a social instrument. It is the legacy of Donald A. Cheney, a story well worth telling.