

You Can Come Home Again

NATIVE SON ARMAND DEKEYSER IS INTENT ON ADVANCING THE HUMANITIES IN ALABAMA.

TEXT BY **Julie Keith**

MOBILE NATIVE ARMAND DeKeyser, the new executive director of the Alabama Humanities Foundation, knows he has a lot of explaining to do. “People don’t really know what the humanities are,” he admits. “I get asked the question all the time: ‘What are the humanities?’ Or people say, ‘Are you a humanitarian?’ I hope we’re all humanitarians,” he says, laughing. “People also ask me if I’m a secular humanist. But this is not a religious thing.”

So what is it? The humanities include the study of modern language, classical language, linguistics, literature, history, jurisprudence, philosophy, archaeology, comparative religion and ethics. Additionally, the humanities can encompass cultural heritage and traditions, as well as art history, theory and criticism. “That’s a difficult thing to explain to folks,” DeKeyser says. “My shortcut is to say ‘culture, less the performing arts.’”

DeKeyser, former chief of staff for Sen. Jeff Sessions, found himself drawn back to his home state after struggling to split his time between Alabama, where his wife lived, and D.C., where his job was. “I loved D.C., don’t get me wrong,” he says. “I was doing great work there: helping people with their Social Security checks, veteran’s benefits, working for Sen. Sessions, whom I’ve known for years and who is a good friend. But when this opportunity came up, I knew it was the chance for me to come home and reconnect with my community.”

DeKeyser’s father Joseph William, a descendant of Flemish immigrants who had settled in Wisconsin, was based in Mobile

with the U.S. Coast Guard during World War II. He met Jean Gonzales, herself the daughter of Mexican immigrants who began importing mahogany from the Yucatan to New Orleans and Mobile in the 19th century. The Gonzales family later opened Star Fish and Oyster Co., where Armand worked after he graduated from Auburn and served six years in the Army. He raised two children in Midtown with the former Beverly Miller and worked for Mayor Arthur Outlaw before joining Sen. Sessions’ staff. After Beverly died in 2007, DeKeyser married another daughter of Mobile, the former Torrey Van Antwerp, in 2010. The couple returns to the area often, since they own a second home in Point Clear and their extended family is all still in Mobile or Baldwin counties.

In Birmingham, DeKeyser is focused on expanding both awareness of what the AHF does, as well as how the humanities impact the quality of life in an area, no matter how populous. “We have to examine how AHF can help a community. We are one of the organizations that can make Alabama a better place to live. We’re not going to bring a big manufacturer to the state, but we all know that the quality of life in a community is what makes businesses or individuals want to relocate there,” he says. “The humanities are about quality of life.”

Two of AHF’s most popular programs, the Road Scholar lecture series and the Museum on Main Street traveling exhibitions from the Smithsonian Institution, literally bring advanced scholarship and culture to some of the tiniest places in the state. Award-



Wes Frazer

ing grants for additional arts and cultural projects from the Tennessee River to Mobile Bay is another part of AHF’s work. “I was just in Red Bay and they had 50 people show up for a planning meeting about how they’re going to use a small grant. Now, \$2,000 may not seem like a lot of money in Birmingham, but \$2,000 is a lot of money in a place like Red Bay. We are here to help the Red Bays, the Ashlands, the Northports, as well as Birmingham, Huntsville and Mobile.”

AHF also provides high-end professional development for educators and administrators through its SUPER Teacher training (School and University Partners for Educational Renewal). In its 21 years of existence, SUPER Teacher training has reached more than 4,000 instructors in the state and more than 500,000 students. “Our university network is a tremendous asset,” DeKeyser says. “The University of Alabama, Auburn University, Birmingham-Southern, Samford, the University of West Alabama, South Alabama, Troy—they have all been huge supporters of the AHF and our teachers.”

DeKeyser says that when it comes to fundraising and community support, those kinds of statistics resonate with business and political leaders. “I’ll be honest with you, it’s a struggle to get businesses to part with their hard-earned assets to support something as nebulous as the humanities,” he says. “It’s hard to quantify the return on that investment. But when you look at education, when you look at the quality of life that the humanities brings to the state, it’s an easier story to tell.”