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Nurturing *a Legacy*

CHRIS TENNE PENDLETON HAS TRANSFORMED A HISTORIC GEM FROM HOMETOWN CURIOSITY TO WORLD-CLASS LANDMARK.

Thomas Edison's winter estate in Fort Myers is an international gem. The inventor, with 1,093 patents to his name, was named one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century by *Time*.

His inventions swept across cinema, telecommunications, the building industry, music recordings, chemistry and of course, electricity. It was along the banks of the Caloosahatchee River that he experimented with his ideas for finding a source for domestic rubber—a development he believed critical to national security. It was to Southwest Florida that he invited fellow titans Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone and naturalist John Burroughs.

His wife, Mina, bequeathed the 13-acre property to the City of Fort Myers in 1947, prior to her death. During the next several decades, it was run more like a hometown curiosity. The city wasn't in the business of running a historic landmark and, by the 1990s, it created a controversy when the public learned that income from the Edison & Ford Winter Estates was being funneled into the city's general fund instead of going back into preserving the wooden buildings and laboratory dating to the late 1800's. By then, the property was shabby and crumbling.

That changed when Chris Tenne Pendleton took the helm in 2001. During her tenure as CEO and president, the place has become the world-class educational and cultural resource it was always meant to be. And along the way, no task was too great or too small.

"Everything she's done seems to be a big job. She rejuvenated the estates. She started with the grounds, getting the buildings in shape, getting the place accredited and she started the memberships, so she made it more town-friendly," says Sidney Ann Brinson, a long-time trustee. "She's doing a great job. Anybody who looks at the property now—and saw it before—can see how it's changed."

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

When Pendleton arrived at the estates, she rolled up her sleeves. She worked with her board to create the non-profit that now runs it, relieving the city from estates operations (though the city and state helped raise funds so it could operate independently, and the city still owns it). She sought grants and funding, and worked with professional designers and the skilled



STORY BY CATHY CHESTNUT :: ARTWORK BY KYRA BELÁN

trades in a multi-year, \$14 million project to authentically restore the gardens and buildings—including the Edisons’ Seminole Lodge, caretaker’s cottage, laboratory and Ford’s seasonal home—back to their 1929 splendor. (That year was chosen because it was the only year the Edison family spent Christmas in sunny Southwest Florida, and it also captured their longest stay.) Naples landscape architect Ellin Goetz researched and recreated Mina’s “moonlight garden”—designed by Ellen Biddle Shipman, the nation’s first licensed female architect. Pendleton directed extensive research into Edison’s natural rubber gardens and long-enigmatic laboratory equipment and processes, which had become a national nexus

in its day. In November, the estates were designated a National Historic Chemical Landmark (the first such location in the state of Florida).

“It was easy to see what I could put in place without expanding our carbon footprint,” she says. “We had to look at the resources we had and get them in the right condition before building new resources.”

Pendleton also sought to invite in the community, not just tourists. To that end, she’s developed a rich educational program for summer campers and homeschoolers with a focus on science, technology, engineering and math, and other fields that intersect with Edison’s legacy, such as movie-making. Though an obvious vehicle for community connection and

revenue generation, she established museum memberships—something that had not yet been done. Pendleton has allied with local artists and authors to lead creative workshops and special events overlapping with the property’s cultural heritage. She instigated Director’s Tours of other historic gardens, estates and districts in Florida, offering history-lovers and patrons personally guided, behind-the-scenes experiences of places she admires. What used to be a weedy patch along McGregor Boulevard is now a vibrant Garden Shoppe where residents can stop in to buy heirloom roses, herbs and ornamentals.

“It was pretty obvious we could grow programs here. Mrs. Edison left the property as a legacy to her

Pendleton’s Cultural Picks

These are Florida landmarks Chris Tenne Pendleton visits regularly on her Director’s Tour series, which introduces participants to the sites through her relationships with staff, curators and collectors.

The Four Arts Garden and Philip Hulitar Sculpture Garden, Palm Beach

The 1936 buildings were designed by famed architect Addison Mizner and the site includes beautiful walled gardens, a contemporary sculpture garden, an O’Keefe exhibit, auditorium and significant libraries.

Bonnet House Museum and Gardens, Fort Lauderdale

The 1920s plantation-style building is built around a garden courtyard along the Atlantic Ocean. It houses

extensive art and international collections that remain from previous owners, well-known artists and world travelers.

Wakulla Springs and Lodge, Wakulla Springs

Edward Ball built the lodge overlooking the largest springs in Florida in 1937, which includes a large lobby, original cypress throughout and a restaurant. It is now a state park featuring acreage for hiking, biking and glass-bottom boat tours.

The Kampong, Coconut Grove
This National Register

Historic site was the home of Dr. David Fairchild, plant explorer, made up of oriental-influenced structures on 11 acres of tropical and flowering plants. It is a National Tropical Botanic Garden.

Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens, Delray Beach

This 16-acre site has ties to the early Japanese farmers in south Palm Beach County. It includes a stunning museum with original collections and special exhibits and an outdoor restaurant in the gardens.

Ringling Museum, Sarasota

The 60-acre historic site includes the ornate 1927 estate of John and Mable Ringling, called the Ca’d’Zan, art museum, circus museum and Asolo Theatre.

Viscaya Museum and Gardens, Coconut Grove
Built in the early 1900s for John Deering, the site includes an opulent mansion, international collections and Italian Renaissance gardens.

Historic Redlands Tropical Trail, Homestead
Located 20 miles south of

Miami, the agricultural area is a step back in time. It includes plant nurseries, orchid farms and wineries, the Fruit and Spice Park, Coral Castle and Monkey Jungle.

Sarasota Mid-Century Tour, Sarasota

Paul Rudolph and the Sarasota School of Architecture created hundreds of mid-century residences and other buildings in Sarasota and its barrier islands, their design based on simplicity, natural resources and the outdoors.

RIGHT: CHRIS TENNE
PENDLETON AND
HER 20-MONTH-OLD
GRANDDAUGHTER,
ADELISE, AT THE
OPENING OF
HOLIDAY NIGHTS AT
EDISON AND FORD
WINTER ESTATES.



FAR RIGHT:
RECREATING
MINA'S "MOON-
LIGHT GARDEN"
WAS ONE OF
THE FIRST
MAJOR PROJECTS
PENDLETON
ACKLED.



husband. The way you make it a legacy is you make it active. The way you make a legacy be real is you make 'the stuff' come to life," Pendleton says.

Annual visitation is up to 225,000 with audio tours in German, French and Spanish and the organization has an annual operating budget of \$6 million. And the list of ways she's nurtured the estates goes on. "She's

250, a 21-member board of trustees, private and governmental agencies, 8,000 museum members and the host of other entities with which Pendleton negotiates. But herein lies her success: She's immersed in what she loves. Each day she punches the clock, she's surrounded by her true passions—history, gardening, culture and science.

roots. As he lost his battle with cancer last year, Pendleton developed a strong connection to Hope Hospice, where she befriended staff and garnered strength. Their daughter, Hilary, has given Pendleton a renewed repository for her love: her young granddaughter, Adeline. Now Pendleton shares her mid-century home with another repository of her affection, her goldendoodle puppy, George Edison.

On the job, Pendleton has recently been focusing on tying into historic riverfront uses through launching daily, guided boat tours; restoring a natural cove, pier and coconut grove; and planning to rebuild a waterfront pavilion. Her staff is working to create a full-size robot and more interactive exhibits to be unveiled in May.

"Thomas Edison died almost a century ago, and people are still interested in the science behind what he was doing. He was big into making the world available to more people, and, as a site, we need to make it more available," she says. "We've done a good job, and that's what I'm most proud of." ❁

The way you make a legacy be real is you make the stuff' come to life.

taken it from a local, hidden gem to an international landmark and that's what it deserves to be. She's done it," says Joyce Owens, consulting architect. "I brought friends who were visiting from England and they were like, 'Wow, this is amazing.'"

FLORIDA ROOTS

It's a gingerly dance with city officials, 70 employees, a volunteer corps of

Armed with a degree in math and physics from Florida State University and master's work in administration, she split her childhood between Palm Beach County and New York City. Pendleton brought to Southwest Florida a professional background that included working with museums in the Carolinas and Virginia, where her engineer husband of more than 25 years, Nathaniel, had deep family