In February, the Chautauqua Board of Trustees endorsed a bold, multi-year strategy to guide the Institution. Building on a recent record of strong fiscal performance and operational planning, the Institution is setting out to fully realize Chautauqua’s audience potential and contributions to the marketplace of ideas and lifelong education. Specifically, the strategy calls for the Institution to:

- More thoroughly integrate and explore the interconnections among Chautauqua’s distinctive mix of arts, education, religion, and recreation;
- Engage a significantly expanded number of Chautauquans in that mix, on the grounds and off, during and outside the season; and
- Create more, deeper exchanges among current Chautauquans and among those who, once made aware of Chautauqua, are likely to embrace it.

The primary objective is to deliver the Chautauqua experience in a highly effective way, through a variety of means, and, by doing so, motivate more people around the world to see themselves as Chautauquans—to find in the Institution a place to express a set of shared values.

As Institution President Tom Becker put it: “In recent years, we have built a number of new facilities on the grounds to provide better accommodations for our summer programs. We must continue to make those investments and also turn ourselves toward the effort to become a sustainable, vital, and enlivening force in American dialogue for no less than 52 weeks a year. Let us begin to think of the nine-week season as a summer laboratory that demonstrates what it is like to be more fully engaged in life and connected to community. What we do the rest of the year will be to share this experience with more people, to promote the Chautauqua idea. By definition, Chautauquans are leaders, careful listeners, and lifelong learners.

Clearly at this moment of partisan gridlock and national rancor, we need more people who identify with Chautauqua’s values in our country and around the world.”

“For the first time since 1900,” says Foundation CEO Geof Follansbee, “we have the chance to have a renewed national visibility and impact. Our recent partnerships with other organizations—National Geographic and Colonial Williamsburg, for example—have demonstrated this. Chautauqua has made its way prudently through the economic downturn, and we believe that now is the time to broaden and extend our reach and promote the ideals of this Institution. We also believe that Chautauqua has the potential to draw philanthropy from a much broader base.”

Board chairman George T. Snyder of Pittsburgh, who led the strategic conversations, explains the board’s thinking: “What we have created is not a traditional planning document, Twenty-First Century Chautauquans: A STRATEGY FOR THE INSTITUTION, 2010-2018
but a strategic vision by which staff can be moving forward in a direction that is outcome-based. We have tied our goals to qualitative and quantitative measures. Put simply, we have focused on initiatives that will improve our offerings, sustain our current capacity, and maintain the magic of Chautauqua on the grounds, while sharing our content more broadly with the world.”

These strategic conversations began with several years of information gathering. Hundreds of Chautauquans have participated in the effort. “We held focus groups around the region beginning in 2005 to solicit opinions,” observes Becker. “These inputs then led to eight different study groups in 2008. Teams of community members were charged with particular aspects of operations to evaluate. The board also created task forces to examine Institution revenues, hotel operations, and the role of philanthropy in Chautauqua’s financial health.” A study of demographic trends was also commissioned.

In Becker’s opinion, the single most valuable outcome from this extensive evaluation process has been the renovation of the Institution’s financial analytics. “We faced the worst financial crisis in our lifetimes during this planning period, we kept our heads down, and we came out ahead.” Becker believes this renewed rigor and fiscal discipline bodes well for the Institution’s momentum toward the strategic goals outlined in the board’s report.

“Clearly the current economic climate has framed much of our thinking, along with the increasing importance of philanthropic support to sustain us,” says Snyder. “However, even in the midst of the financial downturn, we forced ourselves to craft a concise vision statement that provides clarity about what Chautauqua is trying to become and how we will get there in this climate and beyond.”

The title of the board’s working document, “Chautauqua Institution: Dedicated to the Exploration of the Best of Human Values and to the Enrichment of Life 2010-2018” captures the vision and focuses on four framing ideas:

- **Demographic Opportunities**, which address the ascendancy of the baby-boomer generation and its impact on programming, growth, and the coming generational shift in the Institution’s leadership.
- **Economic Sustainability**, which considers the appropriate balance between growth in attendance and the need for philanthropic investments, particularly in endowment, to match the scale of Chautauqua’s operations.

“The work we do here is important. I believe we have an obligation to share Chautauqua with the world …. Content and community come together uniquely at Chautauqua, and those who experience this place can use the digital world to share what happens here and promote lifelong learning beyond the grounds. We can no longer afford to be a best kept secret. It is this thinking that informs our new direction.”

Trustee Jason Phillips
At the Chautauqua Foundation, we are, of course, primarily focused on resource development for the Institution. We are mindful that people want to invest in success, and we are energized by the new vision crafted by the Chautauqua Board that sets out an exciting and important direction for us going forward. We are also reminded at this juncture of just how far the Institution has come in the last three decades — reestablishing our financial stability, dramatically improving the distinction of all our program offerings, conserving trees and the natural beauty of the grounds, preserving and restoring some of our oldest structures, designing and building new facilities, and finally catching up with deferred maintenance in several important venues on the grounds. Recently, we’ve also made significant headway in developing programming partnerships with a number of internationally revered institutions — National Geographic, Kodak, Sesame Workshop, and others — which, in turn, put Chautauqua in the best possible light as a center for adult education like no other.

It was striking and perhaps a bit more gratifying than usual this year that the season ended with such a positive buzz about all that had happened during the nine weeks of 2009 — even as a film crew from Buffalo was shooting a new documentary about Chautauqua for public television. Gratifying, I say, because in the face of the global economic downturn we had cut our expenses by $600,000, reducing year-round administrative staff by ten percent, and freezing senior staff salaries — all in anticipation of a drop in gate revenues by three to five percent. This fiscal discipline was necessary because we also knew the earned income on our endowment was going to be significantly lower this year. We saw it coming and had prepared. As it turned out, we missed our overall revenue projections by less than 1.7 percent. And then, after a slow start during the season, the Chautauqua Fund finished over its goal at the end of the calendar year, coming through at a total that was $150,000 more than the figure for 2008. Chautauquans renewed their support of the Institution in so many ways. It was truly remarkable. We have continued to adjust our budget by reducing our expenses by another $1.1 million for this current year. No less remarkable has been the careful effort by the Institution trustees and Foundation directors in evaluating where we are as a center for lifelong learning and where we are heading over the next eight years. The process of gathering information, ideas, and opinions has stretched over several years. Now the board has committed to a set of strategic investments that you will be hearing more about in the months to come. In May, the trustees will be joined by the directors of the Chautauqua Foundation for a day and a half of discussion concerning how the volunteer leadership of Chautauqua comes together to assure that our strategic initiatives successfully provide a competitive advantage for Chautauqua over the long-term. Our lead story in this issue of Pillars helps to describe the major points of focus ahead. Additional information and an opportunity for community-wide discussion will be offered at a variety of events — porch gatherings, Tom Becker’s annual address, and other meetings of key community and staff groups. In alignment with our emphasis of positioning Chautauqua for and within a digital environment, we will also be continuing the conversation about the Institution’s strategies on a new web page that will be ready by summer.

Meanwhile, the 2010 Season promises more outstanding speakers, conversations, and challenging topics. As always we welcome your input and offer our immense gratitude for your ongoing gifts of time, talent, and treasure.
Thanks to internet technology, the Honorable William A. Currin, mayor of Hudson, Ohio, has fulfilled his duties every summer for the last five years from a small office in his second home at the corner of Vincent and South Terrace on the Chautauqua grounds. Currin’s primary home is located southeast of Cleveland. Mayor Currin and his wife, Deborah, love Hudson, but they are equally avid Chautauquans. In fact, says Currin, what he has experienced here has made him a better mayor.

“Chautauqua helps me because of the variety of points of view among Chautauquans,” Currin says. “It’s so easy to get tunnel vision at home. People tend to be more focused on the daily ins and outs of their own lives in a small town. Chautauqua challenges you.”

“The world isn’t always as good as we think it is, coming from where we live,” Debbie Currin says. “Chautauqua takes off the blinders. I like to be challenged. The content here is not something you can get from cable TV or other media. Some weeks I may be familiar with the books and ideas that are being discussed, and some weeks the content is totally new to me. We got so much out of the week on kids this season.”

Hudson, Ohio, is a town just shy of 25,000 residents. It’s sometimes called the New England of Ohio, known for the picturesque downtown shopping district and its connection to the historic Underground Railroad. Hudson was also the childhood home of slavery abolitionist leader John Brown.

In his articles for Municipal Leader Magazine, Mayor Currin says he tries to challenge his readers — Chautauqua style — to think more broadly about all parts of their communities and encourage dialogue across various constituencies. “Community engagement is critical,” Currin argues. “If citizens are active and volunteer, leaders don’t have to over govern.”

As chairman of the North East Ohio Mayors & City Managers Association, Currin has also found himself bringing the values of Chautauqua to that group. “We want our communities to be in balance. I am always asking, what else can we do to bring balance to our community back home?” Currin says it is not all infrastructure and property matters. “We have to think about the investment in human capital in our towns. I talk about the importance of the arts, recreation, the value of lifelong education, and cultivating respect across religious communities. It is important that all elected officials have these values. I emphasize good civil discourse because it is certainly not modeled by what we have seen going on in Washington.” Currin says he was especially charged up by the recent Chautauqua week on the theme of ethics in capitalism.

Debbie Currin, half joking, calls Chautauqua “our hedge against Alzheimer.” Over the years she has taught parenting and art classes and is a devotee to the 10:45 lecture. Once named volunteer of the year by the governor of Ohio, Debbie is now a retired kindergarten teacher who serves on the board of Actor’s Summit, a professional theater back home in Hudson, was just elected to the board of trustees of the local Hudson Library & Historical Society, and has a longstanding commitment to the Cleveland Orchestra.

Chautauqua has made a profound difference in her life. “I’ve made such good friends through the classes we’ve taken,” she says. “Chautauqua has answered the question, can I really be myself? I can. And I can be joyful and take it home with me!”

Five years ago, when the couple first began spending the entire season on the grounds, the Currins had some reservations. “Is this going to be too much of a good thing?” they asked themselves. It had been twenty five years since the couple had come to upstate New York to take a vacation on Chautauqua Lake. They didn’t know much about the Institution itself, though Debbie knew that her great-grandfather, Frederick Dana Ewell, had, at one time, owned and operated the Mutual Ewell traveling Chautauqua organized out of Chicago. In the early part of the twentieth century, the group advertised “High Grade 5-Day Chautauquas” that traveled throughout northern Illinois, Wisconsin, and states west of the Mississippi.
“Chautauqua has answered the question, can I really be myself? I can. And I can be joyous and take it home with me!”

— Debbie Currin

“They brought culture to little towns and farming communities all over,” Debbie explains, bringing out a framed program that now hangs in their cottage. “The tent Chautauquas emulated what the original Chautauqua provided.” Later, Debbie’s great aunt, Doris Ewell (the daughter of Frederick Ewell), wrote a book in which she declared that the era of traveling Chautauquas had ended with the advent of radio.

After their first visit to the grounds they rented an apartment across the street from their cottage, then for the next five years rented the 1893 cottage on Vincent Avenue before eventually purchasing it. “In 1990 when we got the call that this place was up for sale, we decided to make it a family Christmas present,” Bill explained this summer, sitting in a wicker chair on their raised patio that looks down Vincent toward the lake.

Initially, the Currins kept the cottage as it was, coming for only a few weeks a year and renting it to others during the rest of the season. Then, five years ago, they launched a major renovation project. They dug out the crawl space and raised the entire house two feet from its original elevation in order to add a whole new downstairs level for guests (and maybe future grandchildren). They also changed the pitch of the roof, making more room upstairs. As a final touch, Debbie deployed her artistic talents, incorporating hand painted floral images and a quotation from a famous Chautauquan on the wall in the stairwell. Many other quotes in the bathrooms and kitchen are from all over the world. She outfitted the downstairs with period furniture and hand painted the sinks in the guest rooms and bathrooms.

“We could have sold the place and gotten something newer,” Bill says, “but we decided to invest in the history.”

The Currin children visit often. “Our grown daughters are both lifelong learners, and they are thrilled that we are exercising our brains and our bodies here,” Debbie says. Daughter Kristin lives “off the grid” in Mosier, Oregon, and runs a native plant seed business. Daughter Bethany was trained as a specialist with deaf children and is now a fourth grade teacher in San Francisco’s inner city.

“Both of our girls have pursued things that were different,” says Bill. Debbie agrees: “Chautauqua had a big impact on both of them in the early years of their lives, and I believe that partly explains their urge to serve others with career choices that are definitely challenging,” she says.

Nowadays Bill water skis at 6:30 every morning, while Debbie has immersed herself in Special Studies classes. “It’s not just a matter of coming to Chautauqua,” says Bill. “You have to invest. To keep the value of the place going, you must invest yourself.”

“Chautauqua comes again as one of the most worthwhile endeavors of the Community. It is worthwhile because it brings so much that is joyful, inspirational and educationally right to your own town…. How worthwhile it is to build up an institution in your community that brings to your very door Grand Opera and other Noted Musical Artists, Entertainers and Speakers of National reputation! Where can a few dollars be spent that expresses so much real value in community life? Land is necessary — corn is necessary — hogs and cattle are necessary, but here is something that helps to grow a more worthwhile crop — clean boys and girls, men and women. When we think of real values we have to deal with that which scales cannot weigh.”

— From the Mutual Ewell Chautauqua brochure
Chautauquans themselves are a great resource in programming and making contacts. “We find people who’ve heard a proposed speaker, or we’ll watch or listen to a recorded speech,” Babcock says. Rarely does the Institution go through a speakers’ bureau to book a lecturer, though they do work with their agents on the logistics of the visit. With its expansive program and limited resources, Chautauqua always attempts to negotiate fees. “Most speakers come to Chautauqua for an honorarium that’s in the low range of what an academic institution might have to pay,” Babcock explains. “Fortunately, the Institution’s reputation as having a large, highly inquisitive and appreciative audience and the beauty of the place can be persuasive.” She smiles.

On a sunny afternoon in August 2009, Chautauqua’s director of education, Sherra Babcock, sits in her second floor office in the Colonnade, surrounded by reading material — tall pillars of books and stacks of articles. She never lacks for something to read. It’s Babcock’s job to master mountains of information. It is also part of her job to present what she learns to Chautauquans. Tomorrow she will introduce distinguished filmmaker James Ivory on the lecture platform. A few days ago she recorded a podcast at the Cohen Studio with journalist and screenwriter Mark Bowden (Black Hawk Down). At the end of the month, she’ll record an interview with Pulitzer Prize-winning author and historian David McCullough. Meanwhile, Babcock is monitoring the season’s progress with the CLSC, the Writers’ Center, and Special Studies, among other program units. But that’s not all. Babcock points to a folder that’s three inches thick on her desk. “That’s for the 2011 season,” she says. “The process of developing themes and identifying potential lecturers begins two years in advance. We are always researching ideas, trying to anticipate what will be important two years from now.” Babcock, who joined the staff in 2007, has the drill down pat. “It’s always an educated guess about what themes will have legs,” she says. Babcock cites the week titled “The Ethics of Capitalism,” which featured theologian and author Michael Novak in July 2009. “When we made that decision in 2007, we had no idea how prescient the topic would be. We did not predict the crash on Wall Street nor the fall of Bernie Madoff.”

Every fall, Institution president Tom Becker, Foundation CEO Geof Follansbee, director of religion Joan Brown Campbell, Daily editor Matt Ewalt, and Babcock sit down to consider the lecture themes they’ve been collecting for the season that’s two years ahead. “We start with an outline,” she says. “Then the team shares their ideas with the board in February. We ask whether we are defining the issue properly,” Babcock continues, “and whether we have any direct contacts in the field to be considered.

“Breaking out of the traditional grid helps address the needs of more Chautauquans and their schedules,” Babcock says. “We hope the Chautauqua of the future will provide more and more interaction among all of us.”

Deepening Themes And Building Relationships: Scheduling

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Some of the highest profile speakers, however, command very large fees. “Chautauqua manages to meet those requirements only because of philanthropic support,” Babcock continues. “But once a speaker has experienced Chautauqua, the next engagement may be more negotiable. We provide charming accommodations and good meals taken in the company of other speakers, always with the philosophy that our presenters should spend as much time here as they can.”

This commitment to providing Chautauqua’s lecturers, preachers, and artists the chance to meet each other, engage in leisurely dialogue, build relationships, and fully experience Chautauqua is a key plank in the Institution’s current strategic thinking. “Many, many speakers over the years have come to consider themselves Chautauquans,” Babcock concludes. “We want people to want to come back.”

In her planning duties, Babcock is also mindful of the varied family schedules that contemporary Chautauquans follow in coming to the grounds. These days, few residents come for the full season nor do they choose the week or the few days they will be in residence solely based on a lecture theme. Busy family schedules and two-career households often force choices that may not coincide with a particular program interest. “The Chautauqua Mix” has taken on a new meaning in program planning because of this reality.

Babcock and her colleagues have been experimenting with ways to create an immersive experience on a topic throughout any given day while also taking advantage of the multiple gifts that many speakers bring. For example, in 2009 actor and playwright Anna Deveare Smith gave the morning lecture on creativity and then served in her role as artist by performing her new one-woman show in the evening.

In the season upcoming, filmmaker Ken Burns will speak on “Sacred Spaces” on the morning lecture platform (the theme of the week), and will later present an evening conversation on battlefields. Bringing lectures to the Amp in the evening provides major content in a new time slot. The 10:45 lecture thus becomes only one vehicle in which a theme may be addressed, with afternoon and evening lectures offering conversations on the same topic from different angles.

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Relationships:
C H A U T A U Q U A ’ S L E C T U R E P L A T F O R M

Sherra Babcock

As an example, several of the National Geographic explorers who were featured in the second week of the 2009 Season didn’t know each other before they came to the grounds. “They spent time together, had long conversations, and the stories were flying,” Babcock says. The synergy created by partnerships with such institutions as National Geographic, Colonial Williamsburg, Sesame Workshop, the George Eastman House, Kodak, and the World Monuments Fund will lead to more collaborations and programmatic innovations, she says.

This coming summer, the CLSC book for Week One is Roger Rosenblatt’s brand-new memoir, Making Toast. The book mentions four of the five authors that will be on stage with Rosenblatt for the theme called “Roger Rosenblatt and More Friends.” These writer/friends provided crucial support and help to Rosenblatt in his journey of recovery from the loss of his daughter, which is detailed in the memoir.

In the memoir, Rosenblatt’s daughter, writer Polly Rosenblatt, who was diagnosed with cancer when she was 18, shared her journey of recovery from the loss of her father, which is detailed in the memoir. Babcock and her colleagues have been experimenting with ways to create an immersive experience on a topic throughout any given day while also taking advantage of the multiple gifts that many speakers bring. For example, in 2009 actor and playwright Anna Deveare Smith gave the morning lecture on creativity and then served in her role as artist by performing her new one-woman show in the evening.

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Highlights of the 2010 Season

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New York Times columnist David Brooks opens the second week on “The Ethics of Leadership.” “We invited him in 2009,” says Sherra Babcock, “and he couldn’t come because he was writing a book, so we immediately invited him for 2010 and he accepted. So he’s been booked since spring 2009!”

Weeks Three and Four attempt a new idea. Though each theme can certainly stand alone, Week Three on the geo-politics of Asia and the Middle East leads naturally into Week Four on nuclear proliferation and power.

A new, interactive web program will be piloted in conjunction with Week Six — “Excellence in Public Education.” It will allow Chautauquans and others to start the conversation before the season (in April), discuss the week in July either onsite or virtually, and then continue their learning after the season. Week Nine on the Supreme Court will consider both the historic and contemporary Court. “Some experts had predicted that there would be a nomination in progress by then,” says Babcock. “With the recent announcement by Justice John Paul Stevens, it appears that the timing of this week is most appropriate.”
The Luxury of the Entire Season: JIM AND BETSY VANCE

Georgia-born Jim Vance and his wife Betsy, a Pittsburgh native, lived overseas for some twenty years as Jim’s career in investment banking carried the couple and their five children around the world. While the family was living in Tokyo in the 1980s, they met members of the Piper family, lifelong Chautauquans who invited them to visit the Institution if they were ever in upstate New York.

On a 1986 trip back to the States to see Betsy’s family, the Vances did come to the grounds. They were intrigued. They’d been looking for a home base in the United States — a place where their extended families could easily gather in the summer. After considering a number of vacation spots, the Vances bought a house on Haven Street.

“We saw an ad in the Daily that the Ride family wanted to pass their property on to a family who would respect and love it,” Betsy says, sitting on the porch of the now-restored cottage. It is July, and a television crew from Buffalo has been shooting footage up the picturesque street for a PBS documentary about Chautauqua.

Jim, in the porch swing across from his wife, shakes his head and smiles. “This house hadn’t been touched since 1900. The third floor smelled like bat droppings. The Ride family had apparently owned three properties along here, including the little building up the street known as ‘The Bird Cage.’ The Riders’ daughter practiced her music there. It must have been a lot of property for them to keep up.”

These days, the Vances are among those rare Chautauquans who manage to spend the entire summer on the grounds. They spend the balance of the year at their home in Summit, New Jersey, close to New York City, where Jim still does some financial consulting, though he is basically retired.

The Vances’ sons — all now in their twenties — still come to Chautauqua for family time during the summer, though their interests and activities have grown increasingly varied. “Our oldest, Austin, is working in Macao,” Jim explains. “When they’re here, the boys go in different directions. They bike, boat, or golf and like to play guitar in the evenings on the porch.” The Vances’ youngest child, Madeleine, turns thirteen this year, and like some of her older brothers before her, she is active in Boys and Girls Club.

One of Betsy’s three brothers also bought a house at Chautauqua, and their extended families usually come and spend a week. “Then it’s a three-ring circus,” says Jim, with a lingering hint of a southern drawl. (He is a descendant of Zebulon Vance, a colorful figure in southern history, best known as North Carolina’s Civil War governor.)

When she is not shepherding family guests, Betsy says she loves the recreational opportunities at Chautauqua. “My particular interest,” she says, “is food and nutrition.” This passion often leads her outside the gates, where she enjoys hunting down organic farms in the region and identifying out-of-the-way restaurants that feature healthy fare. “There’s plenty to find,” she says.

With the luxury of an entire summer on the lake, the Vances admit that they rarely partake of all that Chautauqua has to offer. They both love the symphony and the theater, and Betsy is also active in many of the classes offered during the season. “And of course we’ve tried to duplicate our own childhoods for our children — biking during the day, card and board games in the evenings.” Betsy says. Both have been active supporters of Chautauqua’s youth programming.

As an inveterate business analyst, Jim Vance also finds himself contemplating the challenge of running Chautauqua in the current economic climate. “I’d compare this place to a college that needs to constantly examine its business model.” Jim points out that ours is an era in which newspapers and symphonies are shutting down or are in precarious financial health.

“Chautauqua, like many small liberal arts colleges, finds itself facing the prospect of raising prices in order to support all that they currently offer at a time when most everything else — except medical care — is decreasing. And like medical care and private colleges, Chautauqua could find that it’s pricing itself out of reach of many Americans, certainly many of the Americans in its traditional customer base. It really needs a large endowment and on-going philanthropy.” Jim has served on the Philanthropy Task Force and the Development Council for the Institution.

“There are a lot of talented, smart people dedicated to thinking about these issues,” Betsy suggests. Jim nods. “Even when I am at my most ambivalent, I know I prefer western New York and Chautauqua to the Hamptons.”

“For me,” says Betsy. “It’s the mix of ages here that is so important. That’s the key to longevity.” For the Vances, who are unusually young retirees, they have many seasons ahead as first generation Chautauquans.