

Mahj champ ready to tackle top county job

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By BOB FRYER Jewish Press



Bonnie Wise, left, and Judy Serrapica are all smiles at a mah jongg tournament in Tampa that the women organized in 2019. Funds from all tournaments they hold benefit charities.

You might wonder who in their right mind would take on the job of Hillsborough County Administrator at this time – pandemic, crumbling economy, soaring unemployment, racial strife and, oh yes, it is hurricane season – but when Bonnie Wise was recently chosen for the post, she says it was her proudest moment in a 17-year career of public service.

Effective July 1, Wise will replace Mike Merrill, who is retiring after 10 years as administrator and 30 years of work for the county. Wise, 57, will be taking on the top non-elected position in a county of 1.4 million citizens. She will oversee a government with more than 4,000 employees and an annual budget of \$6.65 billion.

Due to coronavirus precautions, Wise was on her computer at home, participating in the May 6 virtual County Commission meeting, when the vote was taken to promote her to the top job. Wise's husband James was also at home and walked into their home office, coffee in

hand, in time to watch and share the moment. Wise said she chimed in to thank the commissioners, but because there were other agenda items coming up under her purview, she couldn't focus on her promotion until later. As she continued working, however, "both my cell phones were blowing up with texts and calls from many with kind, congratulatory comments," she said.

The virus actually played a role in her appointment. The commission had started a nationwide search for a new executive when the coronavirus hit and the search was suspended.

With time running out, the commissioners decided they had a qualified candidate in their midst – Wise. What they may not have known is she is also the 2017 mah jongg world champion – a title she earned at a tournament in Las Vegas.

Her Jewish life

"I am an avid player," she says, adding that she not only travels with mahj friends to participate in tournaments across the country (until the pandemic limited her to online play), but also teaches mah jongg and has organized tournaments locally. She loves the mental challenge and complexity of game play and how each game is different. The social aspect is also important. When she and three other women took



Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Bonnie Wise would travel around the country to play mah jongg. She is shown at Bryant Park in New York City with friends she met through the game. (L-R) Ron Tyson, Fern Oliphant,

lessons offered in 2007 by the Congregation Rodeph Sholom Sisterhood, they became fast friends and now play every Sunday evening.



(L-R) Friends Judy Serrapica, Lynor Romer and Bonnie Wise prepare individual seder plates for guests at Wise's annual Passover celebration. Due to the coronavirus, only a small Zoom seder was held this year.

A scarcity of local tournaments prompted Wise and Judy Serrapica, a woman she met in tournament play, to begin organizing them here. They formed a non-profit, Dragons on the Green (dragonsoonthegreen.org), and made the tournaments charity events. The group has already had to cancel two tournaments due to COVID-19.

Charity fundraisers aren't her only method of giving back. Wise is on the advisory council for Tampa Jewish Family Services (TJFS) and is treasurer for the Tampa-Orlando-Pinellas (TOP) Jewish Foundation. She has served TOP since 2013, several years as vice president for investments. The organization, formed by three Jewish federations, provides endowments and grants for a variety of non-profits.

In 2019, for service to TOP, and in 2017, for service to TJFS, she was honored as a Woman of Distinction by the Tampa JCCs & Federation. She also won a Community Leadership Award from the Federation in 2015 for her work with TOP.

In the past she sat on the board at Congregation Rodeph Sholom, where she and James are members and their now-adult children Aaron and Hannah had their b'nai mitzvah.

Aaron lives in North Carolina and Hannah is returning to Tampa soon to study nursing.

Of the Jewish holidays, Wise clearly has a favorite. "Passover is a big deal for me – a time for family and friends, Jewish or not Jewish, to get together. We always make everyone their own little seder plate. ... It made me so sad that this year we couldn't do our normal big celebration. We did do a smaller Zoom seder, but just not the same."

Wise was born in Brooklyn, moved with her family to Miami Beach when she was 5 and lived there or in nearby Hollywood (minus a few months in Texas) until college. She attended the University of Florida and earned bachelor's and master's in business administration. While at UF, she was treasurer for Sigma Delta Tau, a historically Jewish sorority.

A career of service

Whether the instinct comes from Jewish values she learned while attending Lehrman Community Day School in Miami Beach or was picked up from her Jewish parents or elsewhere, Wise says, "It has always been important for me to give back, to recognize we need to help people less fortunate and always improve the world in which we live. It is just part of who I am. I believe in treating people with respect – how you would like people to treat you."

Wise also believes, "If you have a talent or expertise, it is important for you to share it." For her, that talent has flourished in the arena of public finance. She freely admits she is a geek in the world of bonds and budgets.

From 1986 to 2003 she climbed the ranks in public finance departments at Raymond James & Associates, then at William R. Hough & Co, helping governments and housing authorities finance capital improvement projects.

Those talents caught the eye of Pam Iorio, who was mayor of Tampa at the time. Iorio had to ask twice before Wise agreed to leave the private sector in 2003 to become the city's chief financial officer. Her work there involved budget preparations, refinancing bond issues, labor relations, finding ways to cut costs and other tasks.

In 2011 she left the city to serve as deputy Hillsborough County administrator and chief financial officer. The job remained one of finance and budgets but also included public housing projects, human resources, health care plans for county employees, purchase of environmentally sensitive land and many other tasks.

Among her achievements is negotiation of a pact between the city, county and Strategic Property Partners that resulted in \$3 billion in private investment in the Water Street Tampa project being developed by Tampa Bay Lightning owner Jeff Vinik. Wise also helped restructure a pact with the Tampa Bay Bucs to renovate Raymond James Stadium, secured a deal to keep the New York Yankees spring training home in Tampa for another 30 years, and served on a delegation that attracted the 2019 NCAA Women's Final Four and the 2021 Super Bowl to Tampa.

Wise said when she finally had time to let her promotion to county administrator sink in, "I felt how proud I was, like all the work I had done in the community was being recognized." She said it wasn't just a recognition of her work, but of fellow workers, too. She says she was "blessed to work with so many good people," first for the city of Tampa, then the county, "who have the best interests of their communities at heart."

Wise knows the job ahead will be tough, with her most immediate concerns preparing for hurricane season, continued mitigation of COVID-19 and presenting a budget to the commission that is "sound and meaningful."

She will also be involved in a recently authorized study of racial inequity in the county, which a commissioner requested amid days of nationwide protests over police treatment of blacks. Though Wise says she has never experienced discrimination due to her gender or faith, she does oversee the county's Human Resources department "and have always remained committed to ensuring diversity and equity in policies and practices throughout my career."

Her approach to challenges ahead is not likely to vary from how she has handled her work in the past. "What I have done well historically is being a good collaborator – bringing people together, bringing the best and brightest together to use data-driven solutions. ... With the guidance of this commission, we will work together and navigate a path forward."