

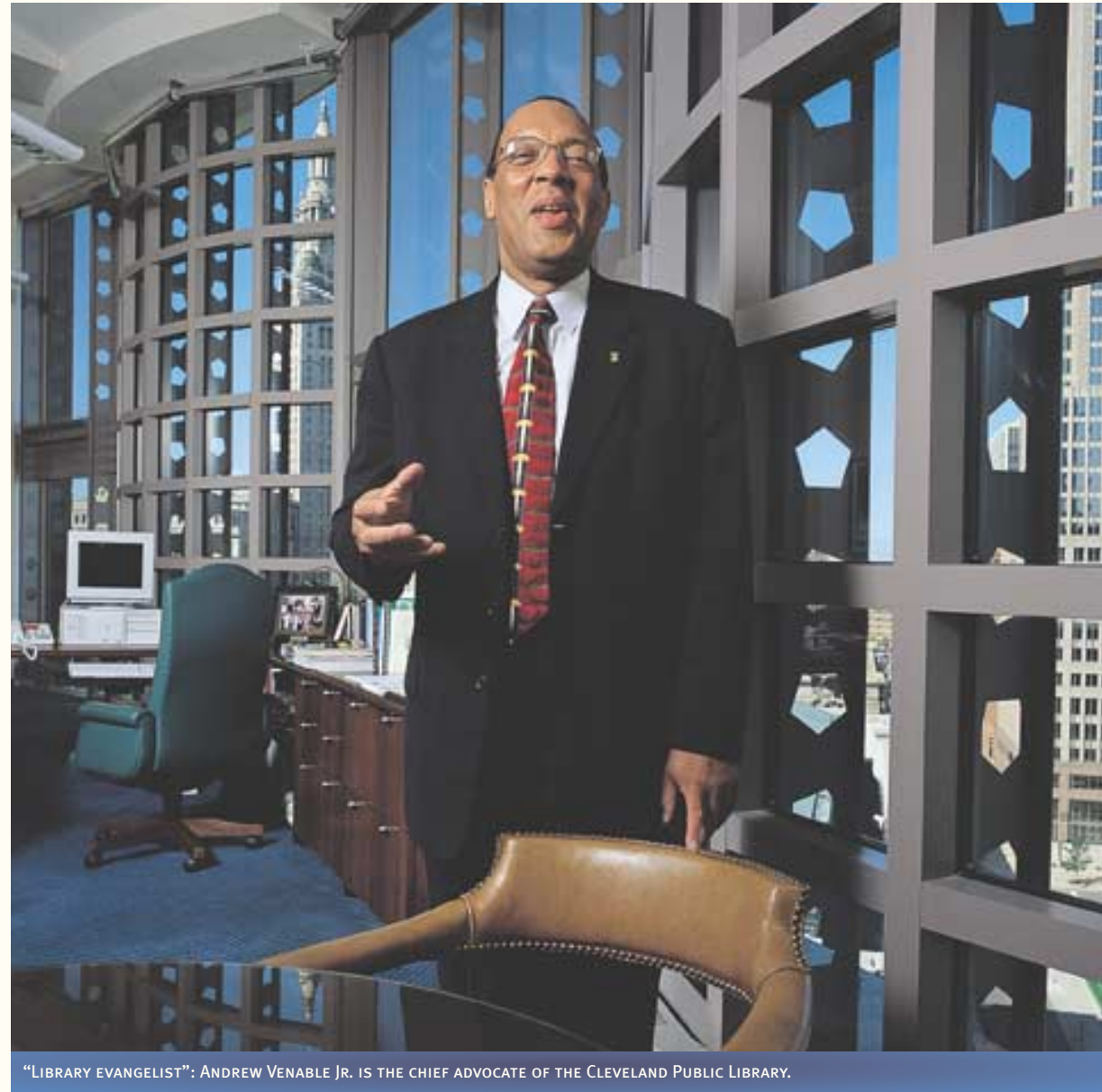
Man of the People

BY EILEEN BEAL

When Venerine Branham called Andrew Venable Jr. in early 1999 to tell him that the board of trustees had chosen him as the Cleveland Public Library's new director, she knew he was the right person for the job. And not just because he had been the library's deputy director for two years. He was experienced and knowledgeable. He knew Cleveland and its neighborhoods. The staff respected him. He wasn't just the trustees' top pick; he was his peers' choice, too.

"The whole Northeast Ohio library community was excited about his appointment," says John Lonsak (LYS '70), executive director of the Cuyahoga County

Public Library system. "We could see, from what he'd been doing [as deputy director], that he was going to direct his efforts in community outreach, in strengthening the branches in the communities, in building readership [while] maintaining and enhancing the library's rich specialized collections," he says, referring to foreign language books, research materials, and electronic databases.



"LIBRARY EVANGELIST": ANDREW VENABLE JR. IS THE CHIEF ADVOCATE OF THE CLEVELAND PUBLIC LIBRARY.

"He was very open and did not set himself on a pedestal," recalls Mrs. Branham (GRS '69, education), library board president, adding, he was "visionary, but down-to-earth, too."

As she'd expected, Mr. Venable (LYS '78) was humbled by her call. "I could tell by the way his voice cracked on the phone that he was overwhelmed—by the opportunity, by the responsibility, by the challenge."

Onetime aspiring businessman Andrew Venable Jr. "backed into books." The result is the top post at the Cleveland Public Library.

Hearing Mr. Venable speak—in deep, modulated tones—brings to mind James Earl Jones. Discovering that he grew up in the 1950s in the deep South might make you think he had a tough childhood. Not so, he says.

His hometown of Staunton, Virginia, was small and segregated, he acknowledges, but it defined the "village" anthropologist Margaret Mead said it takes to raise a child. His parents, Andrew senior and Catherine, and his paternal grandmother, Elnora Venable-Scott, who paid for the clarinet lessons that opened up the world of music for him, never expected, or accepted, less from him than he was capable of giving. The Reverend James Powell, pastor of his home church, Mt. Zion Baptist, taught him, by example, what the "civil" in civil rights means, and that along with "rights" come responsibilities. His uncle, Benjamin E. Mays, always said, "Whatever one touches, his aim should always be to leave that which he touches better than he found it," Mr. Venable recalls.

Growing up in Staunton also "made him very determined," says lifelong friend William Boswell (MGT '77), chief of agency-wide services at the IRS in Washington, DC. "With the lessons, strong family values, and traditions he learned as a boy, he's never been afraid to try things, to accept challenges, to adapt."

"At heart," Mr. Venable admits, "I'm still a small-town boy."

From Business to Books

If you'd have asked a young Andrew Venable Jr. what he was going to be when he grew up, he'd probably have said president of his own company. Mr. Venable says he "backed into books" as a career.

When he left Staunton in 1963, to attend Virginia State University in Petersburg, he had his sights set on a business degree. He had some scholarship money, but he mostly worked his way through college. His most memorable job was in the men's clothing section at the JC Penney department store in Petersburg. "I took the job to integrate the store's workforce. I was there for six weeks before anyone, besides the floor

manager, would talk to me," he says. Yet the job that changed the course of his life was with the Cleveland-based Standard Oil Company of Ohio, now called BP (British Petroleum).

"I did a 1966 summer market research project," he explains.

"When I turned in my report, they liked it so much they offered to pay my final year of college and hire me when I graduated."

Standard Oil brought him to Cleveland in 1968, a year after he earned a bachelor of business administration degree, but two years later the entrepreneur bug bit. He left the company to start a paint business in the Bahamas. "On paper, it looked like a good idea. In reality, it wasn't," he says with a we're-all-young-once grimace. "Three months later, I was back in Cleveland putting out my résumé."

A friend suggested he send one to the Cleveland Public Library. "They were looking for someone with personnel, planning, and marketing skills, so I applied." He became the assistant director of personnel, overseeing 1,100 employees, scattered throughout the city in thirty-six branches and the main library. "I thought I'd be here a year or two; I stayed

thirteen years."

During this time, he earned a master's degree in library science from Case Western Reserve's former School of Library and Information Science, because he found out, the hard way, he needed library skills to do his job. "One day, I called a local business to get information, and they told me it was right there at the library. I was embarrassed that an outsider had to explain to me how my own library worked. The idea," he adds with a chuckle, "was to take a class in cataloging and a class in reference, but..."

He finished the program in 1978, while holding down his full-time job; making sure that he attended son Alex's sporting events and daughter Angela's school programs; helping with youth activities at Mt. Zion Congregational Church; and almost never missing Thursday night choir practice or singing bass with the chancel choir on Sunday morning. "I felt like I was living out of my car for a couple of years," he admits, "but it was definitely worth it."



Indeed. Earning the library science degree not only gave him the skills he previously lacked but also put him on the administrative fast track toward his dream: to one day become director of the Cleveland Public Library.

In 1983, Mr. Venable, who'd risen through the ranks at the library to become business manager-treasurer, then head of community services, "responsible for all library services outside the main library complex," was offered the directorship of the East Cleveland (Ohio) Public Library System. He admits he took a pay cut, but there was a trade-off. "I wasn't going to have to move my family to become a director. It was a small system, a main library and two branches. I knew a small system was the place to start trying out the things I wanted to try."

During his six years with the East Cleveland library, he guided the system through passage of an operating levy and restored its finances and credibility in the community. Then tragedy struck. He and then wife Maxine lost their son, Alex, at age 15. He died from an undiagnosed congenital metabolic disorder. Shortly thereafter, he lost his youngest brother, Don, to AIDS.

"It was a hard time and I had to seek professional help to deal with the grief," he says. "But it is the kind of thing that strengthens you, your family, and your faith."

Gradually, he moved on with his life and his career. After East Cleveland came a job as director of the Gary (Indiana) Public Library System, and, later, director of library services at the Vocational Technical College in Gary. In both posts, he led efforts to automate and modernize the systems, plus provide more outreach services.

His next move was to the nation's capital in 1994 to become deputy director of the Washington, DC, Public Library System. He spearheaded the creation of an areawide college information center and access to the Internet, relocated the library's African-American literary collection, and supported outreach efforts, including a civic forum to discuss community exhibits, among other achievements. So when the Cleveland Public Library system called him in the spring of 1997, for the deputy director's post, this time he knew how a library worked.



CHECK OUT: MR. VENABLE SHOWS EMPLOYEE RICHARD FOX (LYS '81) A MARY HIGGINS CLARK BOOK THAT HE WANTS TO BORROW.

The People's University

On the wall in Mr. Venable's modest tenth-floor office overlooking Cleveland's skyline is a framed picture of seven gold-trimmed words: Process. Programs. Patrons. Promotions. Partnerships. Professionalism. Plant. "Those P's are the steps good library service is built on," he explains, "and I've been using them since I came back to the library."

When Mr. Venable became director, he inherited a system with a \$56-million annual budget (that will hold through to 2003), modernized main and branch libraries, and 12.5 million items (everything from ancient books to state-of-the-art software)—all of which makes it the third-largest public research library in the country, after New York and Boston. Circulation in 2000 (most recent figures) was 5,074,071 items.

He also inherited challenges unique to an old, urban library system: community apathy; keeping up with the exponential growth of technology; and competition from other information suppliers, such as twenty-four-hour cable stations, Internet service providers, and bookstores that have, in effect, become "libraries with coffee bars." To meet these challenges, Mr. Venable recognized the library needed to develop partnerships, ongoing relationships with other like-minded organizations in the community. If that didn't happen, he says, "the system wasn't going to remain strong, much less grow."

Today he is leading the drive to promote the library as "The People's University." The connection between universities and libraries, he explains, is natural. Both are public-access institutions that provide the same product: information. Both prepare people for life and lifelong learning. And both systems are funded by the people.

Under Mr. Venable's leadership, the People's University has increased the number of computers available by twenty-five percent (from 509 to 638 units), and redesigned the system's Web page to make the site easier to navigate. It has extended services for the blind with adaptive computer technology, more audiobooks, magnifying readers, and low-vision reference materials to six branches, and has initiated a Sunday afternoon writers-readers program, which has attracted the likes of novelist J. California Cooper, artist-writer Faith Ringgold, and poet-lecturer Nikki Giovanni.

The library has become partners with more than 140 organizations, such as Cleveland's major sports teams, the

Metroparks Zoo, Karamu House theater, and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, among others, to create programs that stimulate, inform, entertain, and increase library use. Businesses cosponsoring library programs include Southwest Airlines and Bank One.

A key partnership is with the Cuyahoga County Public Library system. From this alliance came the Greater Access Card. This single card allows patrons to borrow materials throughout both library systems plus all CLEVNET Libraries, a consortium of twenty-nine library systems in ten counties throughout Northern Ohio.

And the People's University also has planted reading seeds in the most fertile ground in Cleveland—its schools. "Our library card signup program with the school district came about after a chance conversation with district head Barbara Byrd-Bennett," Mr. Venable says. "Since it started in the fall of 1999, it's introduced over 30,000 youth to the system."

Under Mr. Venable's watch, the library will increase its presence as a repository for, and preserver of, the city's history. "The new necrology file is of great interest to historians and genealogists, and expands our services from the cradle to the grave," he says.

"None of these changes just happened," says board chair Ms. Branham. "He made them happen."

More Is Better

What does the future hold for the fifty-six-year-old?

For now, he says, more of the same: More outreach programs, more partnerships, more mentoring, and more advisory and policy-making work with the Ohio Library Council and the American Library Association. Further out, Mr. Venable seeks to be more of a mentor and less the administrator. He also aspires to teach and even write a book on marketing public libraries. "Some of my colleagues tell me I should do it," he says of writing the book. "They've dubbed me the library evangelist."

The desire to mentor, even in retirement, comes as no surprise to Mr. Boswell, who also is Mr. Venable's Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity brother. "Andy's always recognized that he's stood on the shoulders of a lot of others, those who went ahead of us, who prepared the way for us. Because of that, he's always felt a responsibility to never let those who came before him down and to help chart the way for those coming up." ■

Eileen Beal (GRS '76, history) is a writer and an editorial consultant who lives in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, and frequents "The People's University" for leisurely reading and research.

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Book Talk

Ask Andrew Venable Jr. which Cleveland Public Library program is his favorite, and expect him to waffle a bit. After all, what parent really wants to admit to having a favorite child?

But he'd finally admit it's the *Sunday Afternoons for Writers and Readers* program.

It's not the "celebrity" authors who wing-in and wing-out of Cleveland that make the program special, he says. Rather it's what happens when the program ends. "People stay on and talk and talk and talk—to the author, to each other. They are in a dialogue—opening up, sharing, building a common vocabulary—that creates the kind of commonality that builds communication and community."

The two-year-old program has featured such authors as Amiri Baraka, Piri Thomas, Arthur Golden, Ernest J. Gaines, and Faith Ringgold (shown).



Sing-along

When then President Bill Clinton visited the CPL last year, he was welcomed with a song written by Mr. Venable, and sung by him and several members of the CPL Staff Chorus.

"He loved it," Mr. Venable recalls. The chorus is made up of employees from all over the system, and Mr. Venable is its sing-along director. "When I came back to the library, I put out a call to people in the system who might be interested in forming a chorus. I thought I'd get ten or twelve responses, but I got more than forty."

Originally, Mr. Venable sought to have an in-house chorus to perform at the annual staff holiday reception. But it was so much fun for all involved that, the following year, a library patron concert was added as a gift to the city.

The group's fame has spread—and has even made history. Last November, the chorus sang at the 2000 Ohio Library Council Annual Conference in Columbus.

E. B.

