

# Grads in the GARDEN

As Mary Brinegar '69 retires from her 27-year tenure of running the Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Garden, fellow SMU alumna Sabina Carr '89 plans to build on her legacy.

by Laura Barrera

**W**hen **Mary Brinegar '69** stepped into the role of president and CEO of the Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Garden in 1996, the arboretum was in dire straits. In its 12 years, the 66-acre garden had gone through four presidents and was struggling.

But Brinegar's background in fundraising for organizations like The Dallas Opera, The Science Place and KERA-TV was exactly what the arboretum needed. Despite no background or knowledge of horticulture, Brinegar kept the Dallas Arboretum operating in the black for nearly three decades and oversaw improvements worth more than \$100 million, turning it into one of the most popular public gardens in the nation.

One of the most notable improvements involved SMU: the Rory Meyers Children's Adventure Garden. The arboretum partnered with the Annette Caldwell Simmons School of Education and Human Development to create exhibits that meet the state and national curriculum standards for children K-6. That collaboration benefitted

the arboretum in more ways than one.

"I could take that to different foundations and corporations, and more money came from it because you have a source evaluating the work you're doing at the highest standards," Brinegar says.

After 27 years, Brinegar stepped down last fall. A special committee chose fellow SMU alumna Sabina Carr '89 as her replacement.

Brinegar is impressed with Carr's track record with previous gardens, particularly her role in marketing at the Atlanta Botanical Garden.

"If you can get people through the gate, you can maintain relevance with the community," she says. "There has to be a reason for people to cross the city and say, 'I want to pay to see this.'"

Brinegar hopes that everyone will give Carr all the support to take the Arboretum to the next level, and she's confident Carr can make that happen.

"That's what I would want more than anything from the time I spent there," Brinegar says, "that it will be in better shape in the future."

**Sabina Carr** didn't intend to end up in horticulture.





After graduating from SMU in 1989, she had a successful career in marketing for companies like Condé Nast in New York City.

But when her husband’s career relocated them to Atlanta, Georgia, she felt a little lost. So, her mother offered some advice: Take two organizations she felt close to and volunteer. Carr always loved nature, thanks to the time she spent as a child on her family’s 40 acres in New Jersey, so she volunteered at the Atlanta Botanical Garden.

As fate would have it, the garden soon hired a new director, who brought on Carr to lead marketing. Together, they quintupled every metric over 15 years, turning Atlanta into one of the top 10 gardens in the U.S.

But Carr had a gut feeling she’d return to Texas one day. That came in 2019, when the San Antonio Botanical Garden hired her to be its new

CEO. She spent four years doubling metrics, including visitation, household memberships and the annual operating budget.

When the Dallas Arboretum approached her about becoming Brinegar’s successor, it was an opportunity she couldn’t refuse. Carr says the arboretum has been “the garden of my dreams” since she first visited it in 2002.

Carr’s passion for public gardens stems from their ability to build communities and connect people with nature. One of her favorite moments of this happened to be on her last day at the Atlanta Botanical Garden. Just as she was leaving, she saw a Muslim woman on top of the green roof above the gift shop on her prayer rug, performing the Salah.

“I said, ‘Good. My job is done. I can go now.’ That she feels that comfortable to do her prayers at sunset in a place that brings joy



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Sabina Carr '89



**LEFT:** Sabina Carr stands before A Tasteful Place, a 3.5-acre potager garden, pavilion and kitchen on the Arboretum’s grounds. **ABOVE:** Mary Brinegar.

and happiness and love to so many people, that just filled my heart.”

Now Carr’s sights are building upon the legacy that Brinegar has left.

“[Brinegar] really built a world-class botanical garden, basically from nothing,” Carr says. “Now my job is to magnify the excellence she’s left here. I’m so humbled to follow in her footsteps.” 🐾