

Retiring KeyBank Foundation CEO Margot Copeland leaves legacy of transformed lives in Cleveland, nationwide

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Margot Copeland grew up in the "segregated South," but her parents raised her with high expectations. "Never did I feel that every door would not be open to me," she said. Copeland is retiring as CEO of the KeyBank Foundation.

By [Teresa Dixon Murray, The Plain Dealer](#)

Margot James Copeland was 24 years old living in a small apartment in Bedford Heights, had been out of college for only two years and was working for Xerox. She had a simple prayer: "Lord, please put me in a role where I can help somebody."

There were lots of somebodies. More than 40 years later, Copeland retired last week as a top executive at KeyBank and a career of helping — conservatively — tens of thousands of people.

For the last 18 years, Copeland served as CEO and president of the KeyBank Foundation, which was part of her job as director of philanthropy and civic engagement and executive vice president at Cleveland-based KeyCorp. She also served as chief diversity officer until 2012.

In her roles at Key, she oversaw the foundation's \$20-million-a-year philanthropic investments, focusing mainly on education, workforce development and neighborhood prosperity.

In addition, Copeland has operated as a force in the community, serving on boards such as the Cleveland Clinic, Kent State University and Say Yes to Education, and also serving as a mentor and source of inspiration to anyone within earshot of her hearty, commanding voice.

"Key has been incredibly fortunate," said Don Graves, head of corporate responsibility and community relations at Key.

"She is a national superstar who is known around the country for the work she has done."

That work has included being a champion for the disadvantaged and those who need just a little help to lift themselves up. This takes many forms: Full medical school scholarships for the top black and Hispanic students in the country who want to attend the Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine. STEM education for Cleveland high school students. Community projects to help neighborhoods take off from Seattle to New York. Nursing scholarships for students in Albany, New York. And the list goes on.

Copeland said she was raised in Virginia with an expectation of "servant leadership." Her dad was a Baptist minister; her mom was a math teacher. "I grew up in a household of service. Service was central before anything else, even academics."

Copeland volunteered as a child, in the community, in school and as a candy striper in a hospital. After getting her bachelor's degree in physics — which she said helped her immensely in her business career — she started looking forward to ways to have a broad influence.

Her corporate career also included leading the Greater Cleveland Roundtable and Leadership Cleveland, and she served as vice chairwoman of the Cleveland Bicentennial Commission.

At Kent State, she served as a trustee for eight years and chaired the “student success” committee. Incoming KSU President Todd Diacon said Copeland has “an infectious personality” and particularly cared about students who wanted to excel but struggled if they didn’t have the financial means to stay in school.

“The real secret to Margot is that, instead of cajoling or pressuring us, she was so committed that you wanted to increase student success just to honor that passion,” Diacon said. “Her passion ignited our passion and made us want to do better.”

Fifteen years ago, Kent State’s six-year graduation rate was in the low 40s, Diacon said. This year, it’s 62 percent. The goal is 65 percent, which is good in its peer group. “When we get to that point, it’ll be principally because of Margot,” Diacon said.

When Copeland was recruited by former Key CEO Henry Meyer in 2001 to lead the KeyBank Foundation, one of the first things she did was change the internal messaging and mindset: These weren’t charitable contributions. These were corporate philanthropic investments.

Copeland helped many understand better that investing money into people and communities helps raise them up and ultimately helps the local economies. It’s a domino thing.

She also set an expectation that Key wanted measurements of success for money it invested. “These are shareholders’ investments and we can’t just hope something good happens.”

Success doesn’t mean donating lots of money; it means donating money that has a big impact. It’s “transformative philanthropy,” she said.

She’s particularly passionate about Say Yes to Education, which tries to help teens be able to afford to gain skills and education beyond high school, whether that means going to beauty school or graduating with a four-year degree. When this occurs more often, “that will be transformative for our city,” Copeland said.

Key’s philanthropic accolades under Copeland’s leadership could fill a small book. Among the biggest recognitions: the KeyBank Foundation was named to The Civic 50 by the Points of Light organization six consecutive times, starting in 2013. Atlanta-based Points of Light recognizes

America's 50 most community-minded companies. Points of Light, founded by President George H.W. Bush, is the world's largest organization dedicated to volunteer service.

Copeland gushes at this ongoing validation. "It's hard to give away money well," she said.

But at that and other things, she has succeeded, said Key Chairman and CEO Beth Mooney.

"Our communities are stronger and KeyBank is a better bank because of Margot's remarkable talent, boundless dedication and tireless commitment to excellence," Mooney said. "She has been a champion of our mission to help our clients and our communities thrive. Under her leadership, KeyBank has forged a strong reputation for transformative philanthropy and employee volunteerism as well as an award-winning culture of diversity and inclusion."

Along her journey, Copeland said she was motivated by her faith and a desire to simply level the playing field in communities. "I talk to the Lord so much I don't know how he has time for anyone else."

Copeland said she has one big personal regret: that she got only a master's degree (in education from Ohio State), but not a master's in business administration. "If I'd done that, maybe I'd have been the CEO of a corporation," she said.

But she's proud of her career so far and is considering continuing it (after some time off) by opening a consulting firm that would help others make philanthropic decisions. "My job [at Key] was just to be a steward. My watch in this role is over."

Copeland will be succeeded by Elizabeth Gurney, executive director of The First Niagara Foundation since 2011. Key bought Buffalo-based First Niagara in 2016. Gurney will oversee both foundations.

Online version:

<https://www.cleveland.com/business/2019/06/retiring-keybank-foundation-ceo-margot-copeland-leaves-legacy-of-transformed-lives-in-cleveland-nationwide.html>

