



# Love. Stories

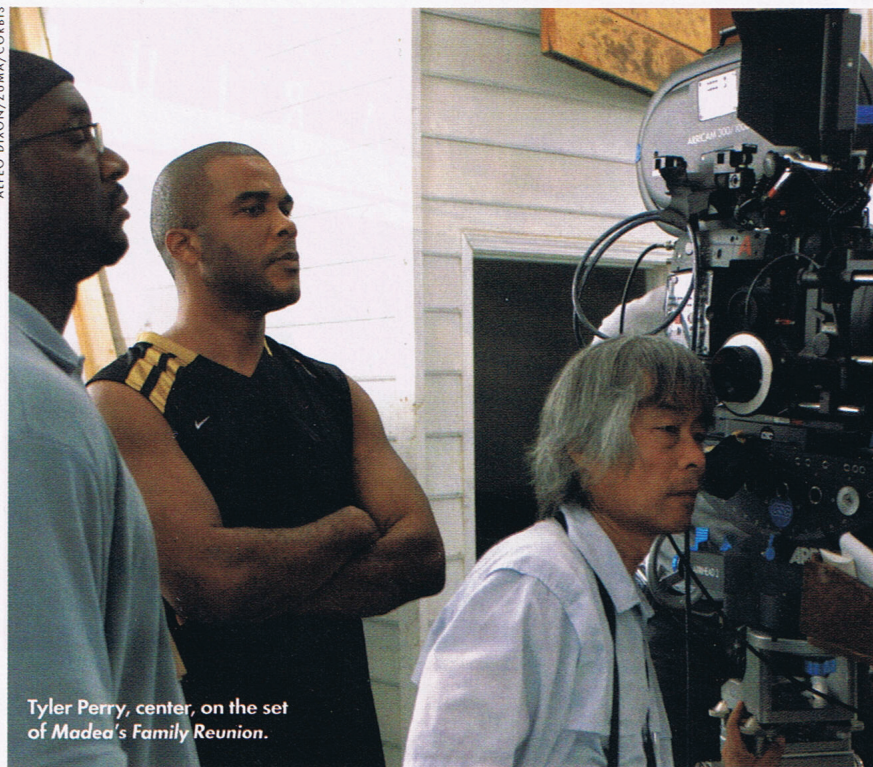
What makes Atlanta great?  
The people who live here.  
Bold, sassy, confident, ambitious,  
but always compassionate,  
Atlantans have a spirited energy  
no one else matches. When  
it came time to celebrate our  
**45th anniversary**, we could  
think of no better way than  
celebrating the **45 people**  
(okay, 41 people, 2 beluga whales,  
1 dog and a cartoon character)  
who make Atlanta the  
best city in the world.

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Tyler Perry, center, on the set of *Madea's Family Reunion*.

# The Playmaker

**11** THERE AREN'T MANY STRAIGHT MEN who would don a dress, gray wig and pearls to star in plays and films that teach heartwarming (and hilarious) lessons about the power of God, forgiveness, overcoming the pain of abuse and the importance of self-love. That's just what **Tyler Perry**—who portrays the feisty, quick-witted and razor-tongued "Madea"—does for a living. The matronly character is a mix of his mother Maxine's nurturing disposition and the gun-toting and cussing ways of his aunt Mayola. The more than \$100 million he's raked in from plays, DVDs and movies—such as the hit *Madea's Family Reunion*—is testament that he's doing something right.

Perry's success is especially impressive considering that, a decade ago, he was homeless on the streets of Atlanta. In 1992, he used his entire savings to rent out the House of Blues run of the first play he wrote, directed and starred in, *I Know I've Been Changed*. The show was a bust—only 30 people showed up—and Perry was left penniless. His family begged him to find a regular 9-to-5, but Perry, who was inspired to pick up a pen after hearing Oprah talk about the healing power of writing down your experiences, stayed faithful to his dream. He worked odd jobs and, by the summer of 1998, had saved up enough money to re-release the production at the House of Blues. He sold out eight shows. Two weeks later, the production had to be moved to the Fox Theatre in order to add 9,000 seats. Before long, he was touring the country with his stage plays. His biggest break came last year when Lions Gate Films took his play, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, to the silver screen. Nowadays, the 6-foot-5 bachelor, who was sometimes forced to sleep in his Geo Metro during the leaner years, even has Ms. Winfrey herself marveling about his body of work and the sprawling 12-acre estate in suburban Atlanta that he now calls home. Who says good guys always finish last? —Chandra R. Thomas

## 12&13 The ROBO-GIRLS

Next month in Germany, Ebony Smith and her teammates will unleash the hounds. Smith is captain of the **SpelBots**, a group of Spelman College students with an unusual avocation: They compete in robotic soccer matches, and their players are mechanical dogs controlled by wireless remote.

Last year, the SpelBots traveled to Osaka, Japan, to compete in the 2005 RoboCup. They didn't win, but they learned a lot. First, they were the only all-woman team, not to mention all African-American. Second, as Smith says, "Our dogs were too slow." So they've spent the past year working on their game, speeding up their pooches.

The SpelBots were created in late 2004, with the arrival of Professor Andrew Williams, who came from Iowa and brought with him four Sony AIBO robots. Soon after, the SpelBots were born.

Besides speeding up their dogs, the SpelBots have a larger goal: to recruit more women to the field of computer science. "More than anything," Smith says, "we want to be mentors."



Ebony O'Neal & Ebony Smith



# <<The Curator

**18** **Dr. Jasper Gaunt**, THE 42-YEAR-OLD CURATOR of Greek and Roman Art for the Michael C. Carlos Museum, has a seductively diffident manner and a voice you have to lean forward to hear. He blends into the museum, with its dim, hushed rooms lined with glowing niches and display cases. But he's politely scathing in a British way, chiding Atlanta's taste in art. "Impressionism?" he snorts. "I prefer to go to the grocery store to get my sugar."

Ruthlessly erudite, he extols each fragment's specific charms: the perfection of millimeter-long painted eyelashes on a shard of pottery, or the exquisitely carved garnet profile of a Hellenistic queen, visible thanks to a strategically-placed magnifying loupe. Gaunt points out the details in a marble statue of the Muse Terpsichore that confirm its quality. "See this horizontal mark on the chiton? It represents the wrinkle where the cloth was folded before it was draped." He marvels at the effect of transparency the sculptor achieved, the subtle curves of breasts and navel. His appreciation is contagious, and his passion inspires archeology and art students alike. "Only standing in front of a work of art has that effect," Gaunt murmurs. "It has the voltage."

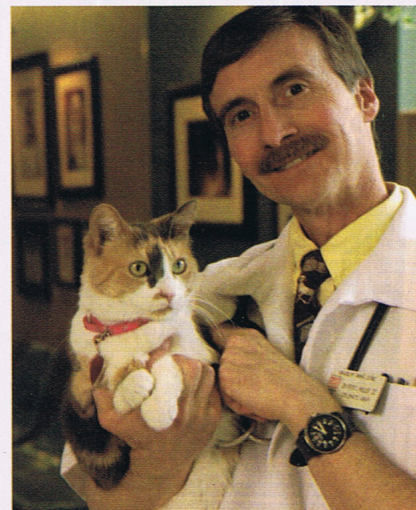
Gaunt's deceptively mild demeanor conceals an insatiable lust for Greek and Roman antiquities, his roving eye scanning the marketplace for the next rare object. "That's what's exciting about developing this collection—each addition can make a net difference." Acquisitions made by Gaunt since he arrived at the museum in 2001 now constitute almost half of the Carlos' classical collection.

Turning to the bust of a Roman priestess, Gaunt's fingers move in the air, tracing the outline of a half-hidden lock of hair on the nape of her neck, his pleasure in her perfection palpable. But is this lovely priestess his favorite? "My best acquisition is always my next one," Gaunt admits. "I'm a decent fellow, but when it comes to objects, I'm completely adulterous." —Virginia Parker

## The COMMUNITY VOICE

**19** High school administrator **Carolyn Glenn** had never worked in journalism, but she knew what she was tired of seeing in local media—at worst, a flood of negative stories about African-Americans and, at best, obliviousness to booming black businesses and neighborhoods. So, joining forces with her husband,

Earl, and close friend Arthur Searles, in 1991 she launched *The Champion* newspaper, touting "positive news about the community." Fifteen years later, the little paper has grown so much it was appointed DeKalb County's official legal organ, the only African-American owned and operated publication in the state to garner such a distinction. *The Champion* addresses more hard-hitting issues now, from school overcrowding to local politics, but it's the "good news" that continues to delight. In an age of frantic and sensational media, it's refreshing to read about the simple joys in life—carnivals, mom-and-pop businesses and school plays.



## 20>> The PET'S BEST FRIEND

He wasn't *really* a drug runner, but **Dr. Peter Muller** felt like one as he ferried \$30,000 in veterinary supplies to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, to help with Hurricane Katrina animal rescue. He'd heard rumors that FEMA was so strapped for human medical supplies they were confiscating veterinary IV fluids and catheters and that truckers carrying veterinary supplies were hijacked at gunpoint and robbed of their cargo. Flying his private plane, Muller "smuggled" IV equipment and animal-only vaccines in bags of dog food. He took eight trips and brought back stranded pets each time, once 15 dachshunds.

Indiana Jones adventures aside, Muller (whose Briarcliff Animal Clinic was founded by his father in 1958) runs Briarcliff Animal Foundation, which aims to save pet owners from the most difficult decision: healing their pets or euthanizing—in many cases, a grim matter of economics. The Foundation helped save dozens of animal victims of Katrina but also helps pets close to home. When a kitten was burned badly in an Ansley apartment fire in January, it was the foundation that paid for the emergency treatment and reunited the wounded pet with its owner.



# The Constant Gardener

**22** WHEN SPRING HITS, AND THROGS of winter-weary city dwellers descend on Piedmont Park at the first sign of blue sky, there's one man who has been preparing for them all year long: **Mark Nelson**, the Piedmont Park Conservancy's head horticulturist, who, along with a team of six landscapers, maintains and beautifies the 186-acre park.

As the largest area of greenspace in the city, Piedmont Park hosts Screen on the Green, the Peachtree Road Race, the Pride Festival, Dogwood Festival and Jazz Festival, not to mention every dog owner this side of Buckhead. Add them up and you have more than 3 million annual visitors, a number that rivals yearly attendance at Philips Arena and Turner Field.

The soft-spoken Nelson, a 46-year-old Marietta native who studied horticulture at Kennesaw State University, is reluctant to take credit. But Monica Thornton, the Conservancy's vice president of marketing and development, gives him due praise. "He and his team do an amazing job," she says. "By industry standards, a park this size would need 12 landscapers."

For Nelson's team, a typical day starts at 7:30 a.m. when they drive around the park to assess what needs to be done. Then they begin the daily planting, pruning and fertilizing. But we're not talking about a few trays of pansies from Pike—the Conservancy purchases 8,500 plants per year. This month, Nelson and his team are installing the summer flowers, like dragon-wing begonias and impatiens, as well as native Georgia plants like oak-leaf hydrangeas, Nelson's favorite.

The grounds crew members also remove graffiti, maintain the off-leash dog park and spread more than 1,000 bales of pine straw. They handle big projects, like aerating the park lawns, and tiny details, like restocking the dog litter bag dispensers (more than 105,000 bags were used in 2003). Soon, they will begin maintaining the Active Oval, which opens this summer with improved ball fields, a sand volleyball court, jogging track and shade pergola.

But he doesn't mind the extra work; in fact, he's hoping to have another 52 acres to take care of if the Conservancy raises the \$50 million needed to develop the now trash-filled North Woods area. Says Nelson, "That would be my dream project." —*Jennifer Senator*



KEVIN GARRETT



## The PRODUCERS

**23&24** One owns a restaurant, dates one of the most recognized women on the planet and maintains a Web site where he discusses the glories of the fly life. The other shuns interviews, enjoys an occasional round of golf and is content to let his clients soak up the spotlight. Between them, Atlanta-based producers **Jermaine Dupri** and **Brendan O'Brien** created some of the most memorable sounds of the past decade.

In one corner is Dupri, who boasts producing credits for Bow Wow, TLC, Usher and Jay-Z under his bling-laden belt and, in February, won his first Grammy for co-writing Mariah Carey's "We Belong Together." How he manages to remain hands-on with artists, juggle duties as president of Virgin Urban Music and have time left for girlfriend Janet Jackson, we'll never know. Perhaps it's those heaping bowls of cheese grits at his Buckhead eatery, Cafe Dupri.

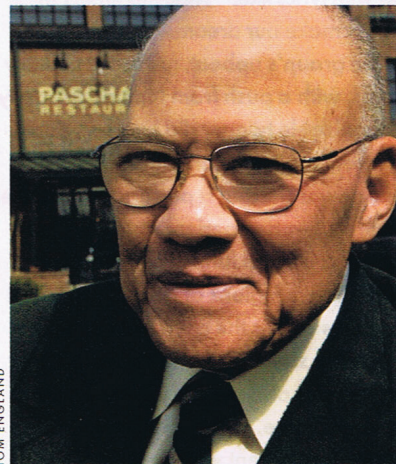
Maintaining a slightly lower profile is O'Brien, who has become one of rock's most sought-after producers. Not only does he know how to coax artists' best work, he's also on call as a session musician. Who else can play the hurdy-gurdy, the glockenspiel and the sitar? In the past 15 years, he's worked with Stone Temple Pilots, Pearl Jam, Limp Bizkit and some guy named Bruce Springsteen. When The Boss played Philips Arena in 2002, he invited O'Brien on stage. The sight of the intensely private producer in front of 20,000 screaming fans was akin to catching Phil Spector on *Skating With Celebrities*.



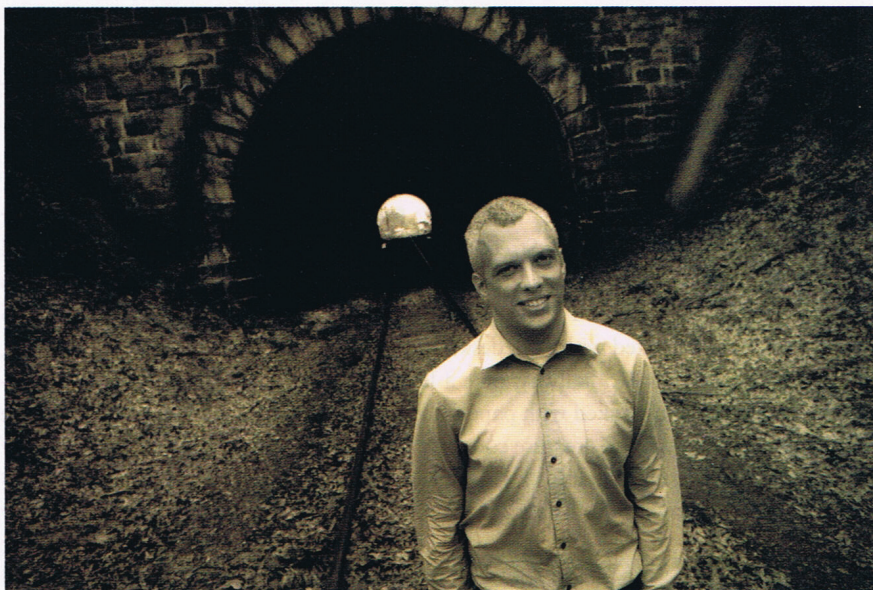
## The Host

**32** **James Paschal** built an empire on fried chicken. Today, after more than 50 years, hungry Atlantans still flock to his restaurant, Paschal's, in search of the specialty he and Robert, his late brother and business partner, made famous. Now in his 80s, James still works seven days a week at the restaurant known as much for its place in history as its food. During the civil rights era, Paschal's was where Martin Luther King Jr. and other black leaders met over soul food to plan demonstrations; it's rumored that King relied on Paschal's homemade soup and sweet tea to soothe his often-overworked vocal chords. Along with serving free meals and extending business hours to provide a location where protesters could greet loved ones after getting out of jail, the Paschal brothers posted bond for arrested demonstrators.

During those early years, serving lunches at the small cafe was tricky. There was no stove, and they had no car. Hot food was prepared at Robert's home and delivered by taxi. Paschal's has since moved to swanky loft space in the Castleberry Hill area. The new location, which also includes a banquet facility, is a plus, but that hot and juicy, flaky fried chicken served with sides like collard greens, cornbread and, of course, sweet tea, remains the big draw.



TOM ENGLAND



KEVIN GARRETT

## The BELTLINE GUY

**33** ONE DAY ABOUT FIVE YEARS AGO, Cathy Woolard returned to her City Hall office where a pile of mail awaited. Woolard, then a city councilwoman, chaired the transportation committee, and listening to experts had led her to a frustrating realization: Atlanta had no transportation plan. Where was the imagination? The vision?

In her mailbox was a package from **Ryan Gravel**, a young architect who'd grown up in Chamblee. When he was a student at Georgia Tech, Gravel spent his senior year in Paris; the amateur painter in him fell in love with the streetscapes, but the architect in him saw, in the city's compact layout and efficient public transit system, an idea. "It's very civilized," he says. Gravel speaks softly, but he has big ideas, and in Atlanta transit, big ideas are in short supply.

Back in grad school at Tech, Gravel found himself crossing under abandoned trestles and driving over old railroad tracks, the berms on which they sat choked with kudzu. Those rail lines, as it turns out, comprise an almost-unbroken 22-mile ring around Atlanta, crossing through 45 neighborhoods. What if, he wondered, the tracks were renovated into a trolley line? What if paths for bicyclists and joggers were built alongside? What if the trolley stops intersected with MARTA stations?

Others had tinkered with capitalizing on the ring of tracks. But Gravel was persistent. He turned the idea into a 109-page graduate thesis, which ended up in the hands of Woolard, who, in turn, became a tireless champion of the BeltLine, as it came to be known. Late last year, in a feat of unprecedented political cooperation, the city, Fulton County and the city school district agreed on a funding mechanism to purchase \$1.7 billion worth of land along the BeltLine. Suddenly, the theoretical became real.

Of course, huge questions still remain. The future of the BeltLine is now, largely, out of 33-year-old Gravel's hands. But he's working to ensure that his vision lives on. He bought a house in Capitol View Manor, a neighborhood in south Atlanta, just so he, his wife and their infant daughter could live close to a BeltLine stop—which, even by the most optimistic estimates, is still years away from being built.

"The city is supposed to grow by 150,000 over the next 25 years," Gravel says. "If you can manage that growth to happen in areas where you want that growth to occur, that's not only good for the city, but it protects the quality of life for the neighborhoods and people who already live here." —*Steve Fennessy*