

WORLD CLASS

FIFTY-FIVE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL FOREIGN-BORN ATLANTANS

BY AMANDA K. BROWN
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FAHED ABU-AKEL

» ONE OF REVEREND Fahed Abu-Akel's earliest childhood memories is leaving his mother behind when he and his siblings fled Israel with their father in 1948, after war broke out between Arab nations in the region. The Palestinian Arab Christian family was eventually reunited, but that early trauma deeply impacted Abu-Akel, who came to the United States in 1966. Nearly forty years later, in 2002, he became the **first Palestinian Arab American elected head of the Presbyterian Church**—the first ever to lead a major

U.S. denomination. During his year-long tenure he advocated “unity in diversity” within the 2.3 million-member organization, an extension of his personal passion to spread awareness of Arab and Middle Eastern Christians. The former Interdenominational Theological Center world religion instructor now heads up missions at Atlanta's Peachtree Presbyterian Church and directs a ministry with international students.

LUIS AGUILAR

» AFTER LUIS AGUILAR left Cuba with his parents as

a teenager in 1961, his family traveled to Florida and Ohio before finally settling in Rome, Georgia. He was fascinated with the immigration and civil rights battles of the sixties: “Seeing all the marches, water hoses, and dogs, I wondered what was behind it all.” Inspired to study law, he enrolled at the University of Georgia School of Law in 1976.

Since graduation he has become a lawyer's lawyer—named one of Georgia's and America's best lawyers multiple times by his peers. He has been **a partner at seemingly every silk stocking firm in town:**



RICK SANCHEZ Reporting from Cuba, where he saw his birthplace and questioned Fidel Castro, was “enormous because everything in my heart and everything I’d grown up hearing about intersected with my career.”

arts, and other departments. But the Atlanta museum, in the midst of its Renzo Piano expansion at the time of Cox’s arrival, was also expanding its ambitions. “One thing I really like about Atlanta is the tight-knit nature of the community and the fact that people want to work together and make positive things happen,” Cox says.

Cox set to work immediately, touring galleries, meeting photographers, and steadily making acquisitions to beef up the museum’s photography collection where it’s strongest—specifically, American photographs between 1945 and 1980. **In just two years, he snagged a prestigious traveling exhibition of Annie Leibovitz photographs.** Harry Callahan’s portraits of his wife, Eleanor, are on display now. These days, he’s preparing for next year’s blockbuster exhibit, which will include some never-before-seen images, marking the fortieth anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s death.

CARLOS DEL RIO, KEVIN FENTON, & VICTOR MBABA

>> IT’S NO SURPRISE that the home city of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is

on the **front lines of the fight against HIV/AIDS**. These three notable foreign-born Atlantans are among those leading the cause: Dr. **Carlos del Rio** is an Emory University professor of medicine who pulls double duty as director of the university’s AIDS International Training and Research Program at Grady Hospital and as Director for Clinical Sciences and International Research in AIDS. The former director of Mexico’s National AIDS Council maintains dual citizenship with his native country and leads clinical studies, including critical AIDS vaccine trials.

Dr. **Kevin Fenton**, born in Scotland and raised in Jamaica, was named head of the CDC’s National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention in 2005. He had previously established an international reputation in the field while serving in a similar post for the United Kingdom.

And long before the African AIDS crisis began inspiring glitzy celebrity fundraisers, Nigerian **Victor Mbaba** co-founded the Atlanta-based Africa’s Children’s Fund. The fourteen-year-old organization, which boasts South African Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu as an honorary

chairman, originally provided books for African students and transitional housing for homeless Atlantans. Now it also provides HIV/AIDS prevention training and medical supplies in Africa as well as scholarships for African AIDS orphans.

RAJEEV DHAWAN

>> AS THE DIRECTOR of the **Economic Forecasting Center** at Georgia State University, Dr. Rajeev Dhawan develops forecasts for the U.S., Southeast regional, and metro Atlanta economies. The New Delhi native has received many awards for his forecasting accuracy, most recently in 2005 from **Bloomberg News for Most Accurate GDP Forecast**.

Dhawan was formerly the director of Econometric Forecasting at UCLA, where he earned a doctorate in economics, before coming to GSU in October 2000 to succeed the legendary Donald Ratajczak. From *The Wall Street Journal* to national TV appearances, Dhawan’s predictions are themselves leading indicators.

JORGE FERNANDEZ

>> CUBAN AMERICAN Jorge Fernandez honed his networking skills while serving as International and Alliances Vice President for Delta Air Lines. Translating that experience to the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce has come naturally. As MACC’s vice president for more than a year now, Fernandez has accomplished many of his initial goals, **including starting a global commerce department for the City of Atlanta** in order to attract more foreign businesses. His connections with foreign ministries helped him cultivate business

“We believe that an investment in the city’s future is an investment in our future. I believe that future is very bright.”

—E. Neville Isdell

in 2001 she started Georgia’s first Hispanic business incubator to ensure that other aspiring entrepreneurs don’t make the same mistakes she once did.

BEVERLY HALL

>> WHEN DR. BEVERLY HALL was growing up in Jamaica, she says Caribbean girls weren’t encouraged to be ambitious. But as **superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools**, Hall is nothing if not ambitious. Her stated goal is to have the beleaguered APS become a “high-performing” system. And though skeptics certainly persist, she is well on her way. This year, 100 percent of APS elementary schools made Adequate Yearly Progress under the No Child Left Behind guidelines. She’s also been credited with lowering the dropout rate, filling critical teacher vacancies, consolidating school districts, converting aging buildings into state-of-the-art facilities, and luring hundreds of supporters and sponsors to the Atlanta system. Her work earned her the nation’s highest award for urban educators last year. She also serves on the Harvard Urban Superintendents Program board and helps set national education policies.

PAUL HEWITT

>> WHEN BOBBY CREMINS stepped down as Georgia Tech men’s basketball coach in 2000, the Jackets hadn’t advanced to the NCAA Tournament in four seasons. Enter Paul Hewitt. The Saint Andrew, Jamaica-born New Yorker became **Tech’s first-ever black hoops coach** and led the team to the Big Dance his first season. Under Hewitt, the Yellow Jackets have been to the tourney four

times and have a record of 127–95. “People get the feeling that coaches can wave a magic wand, but it comes down to having kids who are committed,” he says.

Or maybe it comes down to those skill-building sessions his staff hosts. Perhaps it has something to do with recruiting. After all, by the time Hewitt’s first recruiting class became juniors, Tech was on its way to the National Championship.

E. NEVILLE ISDELL

>> SINCE 1886, Coca-Cola has helped make Atlanta into the city it is today—donating millions to the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Emory University, CARE, the Woodruff Foundation, and many other local institutions. And since 1966, **E. Neville Isdell—now CEO/chairman of the board—has been helping make Coke into the company it is today.** The native of Downpatrick, North Ireland, was raised in South Africa, where he was an anti-apartheid activist, earning a degree in social sciences from the University of Cape Town before taking his first job with Coca-Cola more than forty years ago. Since then, his work for Coke has led him to Johannesburg, Australia, the Philippines, Germany, India, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, Great Britain, and finally Atlanta, the heart of the soda empire. “The Coca-Cola Company is an Atlanta company,” says Isdell, noting the company’s continued community involvement, most notably a recent donation of land for a new civil rights museum. “We believe that an investment

in the city’s future is an investment in our future. I believe that future is very bright.”

MUTA ISSA

>> DR. MUTA ISSA wears dual hats as an associate professor of urology at Emory and chief of urology at the Atlanta VA Medical Center. The nationally renowned pioneer of prostate cancer therapy was born in Iraq but earned his medical degree in Ireland and came to the United States for residency training. Issa holds more than ten patents and an M.B.A. from the Goizueta Business School at Emory University, but he is most proud of receiving an Ellis Island Medal of Honor in 2005 (previous winners include Lee Iacocca and Bob Hope). “It was truly special. I was surrounded by family, most people were crying. It’s a great honor,” he says. The prestigious award recognizes Americans of diverse origins for their contributions to the United States. Dr. Issa has **dedicated his life to serving veterans.** “To help someone achieve wellness, to cure them, is gratifying,” he says. Issa knows firsthand what his patients endure; in 2005 he underwent successful prostate cancer treatment.

LÚCIA JENNINGS

>> WHEN BRAZILIANS began flocking to Atlanta some twenty years ago (they are now the eighth largest foreign population here, with more representation than any European or African nation), Lúcia Jennings had already been here for ten years and was eager to greet her fellow countrymen. President and **cofounder of Georgia’s Brazilian American Cham-**

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team in goals in three of those five seasons (finishing second the other two) and in points in two of them. **He routinely ranks among the league's top ten leaders in goals and points.**

Less quantifiable but just as critical has been his contribution to the success of the franchise. Preceded by Patrik Stefan, a first-overall pick who failed to live up to hype, and temporarily outshined by Dany Heatley, who left the team due to circumstances off the ice, Kovalchuk supplied the marquee name and face that would win over fans in a decidedly nonhockey town. Says general manager Don Waddell of Kov's feat: "We knew it would be a challenge to get everyone to embrace this sport, but he has helped us with that and has done so much quicker than I ever thought possible."

JOHN LEE

>> **PARDON THE PUN**, but for local business and government, John Lee is the Seoul of the Korean community. Since moving here in 1980, Lee has been president of the Korean American and Asian American chambers of commerce, was the first Asian member of the Governor's Commission, and is the current president of the Korea Southeast U.S. chamber—posts that have put him in prime positions to bend the ears of multiple mayors, governors, and county CEOs. Just ask Mayor Shirley Franklin, with whom Lee helped entice Korea-based businesses such as Kia and Hyundai to Atlanta during the Asia Mission 2007 trade trip this past April.

But the longtime consultant and commercial real estate developer's passion lies with Buford Highway, where he has helped **establish around 1,000 Korean American-owned businesses** and where his own company, Business Resources USA, is located. Those I-85 "International Village" signs, for example? His idea. Those new sidewalks and medians along stretches of the hazardous road? He worked with DeKalb County to obtain funding. "My hope is that it continues to improve," says Lee. "It's one of the best places to come visit; you name it, you can get it here."

BERNARD MULLIN

>> **THIS YEAR**, *Billboard* and *Pollstar* magazines ranked Philips Arena the nation's sixth best concert and event venue. The Atlanta Thrashers made it to the quarterfi-

nals of the playoffs and infected the city with Blueland fever. And the Hawks... well, the Hawks have some fancy new uniforms. We can thank Dr. Bernard (Bernie) Mullin for all of this. Since 2004, the Liverpool, England, native has been the **president and CEO of Atlanta Spirit**, the parent company of Philips Arena, the Thrashers, and the Hawks. During his twenty-eight-plus years in sports management and marketing, he has turned around the Pittsburgh Pirates, worked with the Colorado Rockies and Denver Grizzlies, and spent nine years teaching sport management at the University of Massachusetts. Mullin, who lives near Chastain Park, also serves on the boards of Central Atlanta Progress and the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce.

ELIZABETH OFILI

>> **NIGERIAN NATIVE** Dr. Elizabeth Ofili has a good heart and wants to ensure others do, too. The chief of cardiology at Morehouse School of Medicine, who earned her medical degree in Nigeria and later earned a master's in public health at Johns Hopkins University, oversees **critical research on why heart ailments disproportionately impact African Americans**. Her work as the principal investigator on National Institutes of Health-sponsored studies on the genetic determinants of hypertensive heart disease among blacks has made her a preeminent expert in the field. Along with spearheading community efforts to better educate the black community on the prevention and treatment of heart disease and strokes, Ofili has served as president of the Atlanta-based Association of Black Cardiologists and held volunteer appointments with the International Society of Hypertension in Blacks, the American College of Cardiology, and the American Heart Association. (She has also studied the cardiovascular effects of space travel for NASA.)

EGBERT PERRY

>> **EGBERT PERRY** is no plastic surgeon, but he specializes in facelifts. The Antigua native's real estate development company has literally changed the look of Atlanta. Perry is chairman and CEO of The Integral Group, which **controls more than a billion dollars worth of residential and commercial real estate in metro Atlanta**, along with projects in ten other cities. The firm has transformed areas ravaged by



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urban decay—places that most developers wouldn't touch—into prime property. His company has been instrumental in redevelopment around Centennial Olympic Park, West End, City Hall East, and Auburn Avenue. One of Perry's latest projects is Auburn Pointe, a \$135 million mixed-use community that will include apartments, townhouses, single-family homes, a senior living facility, a child development center, and 8,000 square feet of retail space. Perry serves on boards for local and national institutions such as the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, Central Atlanta Progress, the National Housing Conference, and Mayor Franklin's Peachtree Corridor Task Force, which he helps lead.

OLGA GOMEZ PLAUT

>> WHEN MEDELLIN, COLOMBIA, native **Olga Gomez Plaut** moved from Paris to Atlanta with her husband, Roy, in 1982, she "was disappointed with the scarcity of opportunities for children to learn other languages and in general the low interest in matters international." So she spearheaded a small group of parents, educators, and businesspeople to **start the Atlanta International School**. AIS, which has grown from fifty-one students in its first year to more than 900 in 2007, is one of only a few schools in the United States to offer the rigorous International Baccalaureate Programme from pre-K through high school. Grade schoolers study regular academic subjects in both English and one of three other languages. "I know many AIS parents from overseas who have chosen to bring their businesses and families here only because of the school," she says. "Also, since half of the students are American, the international students profit from exposure to American culture and vice versa." Plaut has a master's degree in social work and is on the Board of Counselors of Families First, Atlanta's largest and oldest social agency.

TANJA POPOVIC

>> IN 1989, DR. TANJA POPOVIC was a rising star in the field of microbiology. From her home in Croatia, she won a Fulbright to study at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. She figured she'd spend a year or so studying at "the premier public

health agency in the world" and then take that knowledge back home.

After the fellowship, Popovic went back to Croatia with her husband and two young children. But it wasn't long before she felt compelled to return to Atlanta, where she started working as a research scientist at the CDC, gradually climbing the agency's ranks. Over the years, she would travel to more than twenty countries, helping curb the spread of infectious diseases.

In 2001, she **headed up the anthrax investigations** that alarmed the nation in the weeks following 9/11. Popovic and her team worked around the clock, isolating samples to determine that these weren't random acts of nature but deliberate acts of malice. President Bush singled out her work during a visit to the agency.

Today, Popovic is the CDC's chief science officer, building bridges between health agencies, testifying before Congress, and ensuring that the CDC remains the go-to organization when disease strikes. Almost twenty years after first arriving at the CDC, she's still amazed at the passion of her diverse colleagues. "When you walk down the halls, you see people of all shapes and colors and ethnicities. You hear so many different languages and accents. That's what's so unique and makes this such an extraordinary place to work."

ANTHONY PRATT

>> AUSTRALIANS GLEEFULLY mow down "tall poppies" (in Southern speak, that's anyone who's too big for their britches), so it pays to keep a low profile. Maybe that's one reason billionaire Anthony Pratt left his native Melbourne and came to Atlanta in 1991. It's tough to be inconspicuous in a nation where your father is the third richest man. Today, Conyers-based Pratt Industries—the American division of family business Visy Industries, the world's largest privately owned recycling and packaging company—earns more than \$2 billion annually under Pratt, CEO and chairman. Aside from his residence, the 8,000-square-foot Villa Juanita next to the governor's mansion, Pratt isn't flashy, making his mark as a **world leader in environmental standards** rather than as a flamboyant high roller. Pratt's company and its 1,000-plus Georgia employees recycle more than 700,000 tons of paper per year, saving the equivalent of more than 109 million trees since opening

becoming the first surgeon to implant a gliasite catheter, a device that treats recurrent brain tumors, in a child. And he is **one of only a few surgeons in the world doing Gamma Knife radiosurgery**, which delivers radiation pinpointed at a tumor or vascular malformation, causing much less damage to surrounding brain tissues than do more invasive procedures.

AJEET ROHATGI

>> **SOLAR CELLS ARE HOT.** Just ask Dr. Ajeet Rohatgi, who for decades has been

studying ways to harness sunlight and convert it to electricity. Rohatgi is founder and director of Georgia Tech's University Center of Excellence in Photovoltaic Research and Education, one of only two such centers in the country. At Tech, Rohatgi leads a team of two dozen researchers doing pioneering work that could one day change the way we power our desk lamps and electric razors. Rohatgi's research has led to more than a dozen patents; in 1996, he designed and built the rooftop solar panel array atop the Olympic swimming pool at Georgia Tech, a

system which at the time was the largest in the world.

Solar cells use silicon wafers to soak up the sun's rays, which are then converted to electricity. Right now, solar cells account for less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the world's electricity. No surprise, since this source is about two to three times as expensive as traditional electricity. But Rohatgi believes that by making the silicon wafers more efficient and cheaper, **one-quarter of the world's electricity could come from solar cells within twenty-five years.** Such technology

UP-AND-COMERS

ANALIA BORTZ

>> Rabbi Analia Bortz, who helped start Congregation Or Hadash in Sandy Springs with her husband, Rabbi Mario Karpuj, has overcome more than one stereotype. This Buenos Aires native has an M.D. in radiology and a Ph.D. in bioethics and also happens to be the **first female conservative rabbi from predominantly Catholic Argentina.** "I wanted to put together body and soul," explains Bortz of her multifaceted career. "I am fascinated with the creation of God and wholeness of human beings."

Bortz also serves on the bioethics committee of Children's Healthcare of Atlanta and lectures on medical controversies at Emory and the Centers for Disease Control. Nonetheless, this overachieving mother of two wants congregants to "discover God in their daily lives" and cites family as her greatest accomplishment. Bortz finds Atlantans eager to grow intellectually, but she notes that Americans tend to live to work instead of working to live. "Capitalism does not allow us to spend enough time with those we love. I am coming from a culture where dinnertime is very important."

YELENA EPOVA

>> Yelena Epova's first job when she and her husband came to Atlanta from St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1990 was working as a cashier at Cub Foods. Despite having earned an engineering degree in Leningrad, she had never touched a computer. But by attending night courses at Georgia State, she soon parlayed her love of math into a more practical accounting degree. Upon graduation

she achieved **the highest score on the CPA exam in Georgia** and one of the top 100 scores in the United States. Now a partner in Habif, Arogeti & Wynne's Tax Group, she has founded GlobalEXECWomen, an Atlanta-based group for women working in international companies. Quoted by media on topics from the euro to export incentives and consulted by countries from Canada to Denmark, Epova is a recognized expert on international tax issues. She is also an active volunteer at the Marcus Jewish Community Center. Epova says she has found Atlanta to be very accepting of immigrants. "I have never felt foreign," she notes. "People were very interested in my background... Atlanta is getting to be much more cosmopolitan. But I hate the traffic and the hot summers."

HYUN-ZU KIM & TYCHO STAHL

>> Four years ago, when German-born lawyer Tycho Stahl chose to work in Atlanta over alternative offers from New York, San Francisco, and Boston, the response from friends was unanimous: "Are you nuts?" Today, he cites the choice as the best decision he and his lawyer wife, Korean native Hyun-Zu Kim, ever made. "We were impressed and amazed at how open people were—we've made more friends here than we did in Boston," says the Harvard alumnus.

Through their respective firms of Smith, Gambrell & Russell and the Montgomery, Alabama-based Haskell Slaughter, Stahl and Kim are a **dynamic international law duo**, particularly for European and Korean businesses branching out in the Southeast United States. Billable hours aside, both aggres-

sively market Atlanta to the world. Stahl frequently travels overseas to entice European companies on behalf of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. Kim traveled with Mayor Shirley Franklin's Asia Mission 2007 delegation and has lobbied Congress through her position as director of regional development for the Korean-Southeast chamber.

DAVID PANTON

>> Dr. David Pantan's resume would make anyone feel like a chronic underachiever. His credentials include a doctorate in management studies from Oxford University, a **Rhodes Scholarship**, a J.D. from Harvard Law School, presidency of the **Harvard Law Review**, and an A.B. in public policy from Princeton. Add to that already impressive list two years as a senator in the parliament of his native Jamaica and work as an investment banker at New York's Morgan Stanley & Co., where he focused on mergers and acquisitions in Latin America. He moved to the Atlanta office of Mellon Ventures in 2004. Nowadays Pantan is focusing his efforts on Navigation Capital Partners, the Atlanta-based \$375 million private equity firm he helped launch late last year.

VIBHA RUSTAGI

>> It's no surprise that entrepreneur Vibha Rustagi is holding her own in a field traditionally dominated by men. She has a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering, a master's in business administration, and earned seven patents during her former tenure at Scientific Atlanta. "**We recognized the void in the digital TV industry for iTV expertise,**" she says, explaining why she helped start Itaas, an Atlanta-based company that provides interactive television and

video-on-demand products to more than 100 companies. As cofounder, president, and CEO, Rustagi focuses on expanding the company and staying ahead of the technology curve with partners Jatin Desai and Jaspal Bhasin. The **New Delhi native**, raised in Zambia, had a general interest in science early on. "My family was very focused on higher education and has always been very science-oriented. My dad was in finance, one of my brothers is a statistics professor, and the other has an M.S. in electrical engineering. I was interested in the projects they discussed at home and was always encouraged to pursue my passion," she says.

JASON WALKER

>> United For Jamaica is not just the name of a nonprofit organization—the slogan epitomizes the unyielding commitment of its president, Jason "Skywalker" Walker, to keeping his homeland's spirit alive in Atlanta. His cultural diversity campaign launched in 1992 when, as a Georgia State University student serving as an undergraduate representative to the state Board of Regents, he co-authored resolutions that helped establish African American studies and multicultural education departments in all Georgia colleges and universities. Walker gained popularity from 1993 to 1998 as cohost of the popular **Caribbean Shakedown** show on 88.5 FM and, now, as the music man behind **Caribbean Runnings** on 89.3 FM. The former **Caribbean Express** newspaper editor in chief still promotes and produces many local reggae shows. He also works as an editor for the online magazine, **Cariblifecentral.com**. But it's a passion for civic engagement that drives his work for Caribbean charities and as cofounder of the Jamaica-Georgia Chamber of Commerce.