

AHFA ANNUAL MEETING AND CEO CONFERENCE



NOVEMBER 13-16, 2025
HOTEL BARDO
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

SHAPING THE FUTURE: TRENDS AND INSIGHTS FOR TOMORROW

November 13 - 16, 2025 ♦ Hotel Bardo ♦ Savannah, Georgia

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 13

3:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m. [Registration](#) – Ballroom 2 Foyer

4:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m. [AHFA Board of Directors Meeting](#)
Ballroom 2

7:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m. [Reception](#) – Bar Bibi

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8:00 p.m. - 9:30 p.m. [Dinner](#) – Carriage House

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 14

7:00 a.m. - 8:00 a.m. [Breakfast Buffet](#) – Carriage House

8:00 a.m. - 8:15 a.m. [Meeting Welcome](#) – Grand Ballroom
*Andy Bray, AHFA Chair 2025,
Vanguard Furniture Company*



Andy Bray was appointed president of Vanguard Furniture Company in 2012, and added the responsibility as the CEO in 2023. He has served the company since 1993, when he began his career as a sales representative in Tennessee, Kentucky and Ohio. His role later expanded to managing the company's two retail stores in Ohio and Michigan, before moving back to the factory in Conover, N.C. His direction of merchandising and strategic planning led to a tripling of sales and creating the "Make it Yours Bedroom" program that positioned Vanguard as a prime resource for custom furniture. He also introduced 3D visualization of consumer-generated design with instantaneous price quotes as options are revised.

8:15 a.m. - 9:15 a.m. [Customers on the Cusp
\(of Something Big\)](#)
*Charles Kennedy,
Consumer Insights Expert*



The son of a diplomat, Charles spent his formative years in Yugoslavia, Greece and Korea. He graduated from Mary Washington University in Virginia and later took graduate-level courses in the Futures Study program at the University of Houston.

After college Mr. Kennedy rode to Los Angeles on his motorcycle and spent a year couch-surfing as he attempted to break into the entertainment business. After a decade with Fox Broadcasting, Charles spent seven years with the premiere social trends company DYG. There he worked with corporate leaders across major brands to leverage consumer insights, including projects with AHFA. That role took him back to TV where he led research and strategy

teams at ABC, NBCUniversal, The Advertising Research Foundation, Amazon Prime Video and Apple TV+.

An avid road biker and mediocre surfer, Charles works and writes in Los Angeles while taking classes in everything from astronomy to strength-training.

9:00 a.m. - 11:30 a.m. [Spouse and Guest Breakfast](#)
Carriage House

9:15 a.m. - 9:30 a.m. [Break](#)

9:30 a.m. - 10:30 a.m. [Lessons in Leadership](#)

*Paula Wallace, president and co-founder,
Savannah College of Art and Design, with
Eric Hunicutt, Executive Development
Strategist & Coach*

Paula Wallace founded SCAD in 1978, and is one of the longest-serving women presidents in the history of U.S. higher education. Since being named CEO in 2000, she has more than tripled enrollment, elevated the SCAD alumni employment rate to 99%, and led the creation of new SCAD locations in the U.S. (SCAD Atlanta) and Europe (SCAD Lacoste), as well as SCADnow, the university's innovative online learning platform. As the world's most comprehensive university for creative professions, SCAD currently enrolls more than 18,600 students.



Wallace established SCAD as a global leader of applied research through SCADpro, the university's in-house research lab, where SCAD students and professors produce new products and services for clients including Google, Deloitte, Home Depot, Volvo, BMW, NASA, Capital One and hundreds of other Fortune 500 brands. Wallace has led the creation and establishment of four university museums on two continents, including SCAD FASH Museum of Fashion + Film (Atlanta), SCAD FASH Lacoste (France), and the AIA Award-winning SCAD Museum of Art (Savannah), widely recognized as the top teaching museum in the world.

Wallace's impact on the creative industries is vast. Across her more than 45 years at SCAD, she has led the creation of more than 100 academic degree programs—many the first of their kind—including, most recently, the M.A. and M.F.A. in sneaker design, the new Master of Business Innovation (M.B.I.), and two degrees launched in collaboration with Google: a B.F.A. in user experience design and a B.F.A. in user experience research. She has conceived and created the SCAD Savannah Film Festival (the world's largest university-run film festival), SCAD

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TVfest, SCAD AnimationFest, SCAD deFINE ART, and the legendary SCAD Fashion Show, among other signature showcase events at the university, all of which are designed to launch the careers of SCAD students.



Eric Hunicutt is an executive coach, workshop facilitator, learning designer, content creator, consultant, performer and educator with over two decades experience guiding individuals and teams, leading creative projects and educational initiatives, and mentoring and coaching clients as they share the stories of their work and their professional journey with the world.

He is a graduate of The University of North Carolina and attended the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science at Stony Brook University.

10:30 a.m. - 11:15 a.m. **SCAD Faculty Panel Discussion**

11:15 a.m. - 11:30 a.m. **Common Thread for the Cure**
Laura Holland, Hickory Chair



In addition to her role as vice president of marketing at Hickory Chair, Laura Holland serves on the board of directors of the Common Thread for the Cure foundation. This is a volunteer organization that provides support to individuals or their immediate family members battling breast cancer in every sector of the home and design industries. In addition to providing financial grants, support and information, the mission is to raise awareness of the organization and the help providing support to individuals actively going through their journey.

11:30 a.m. - 11:45 a.m. **Election of 2026 AHFA Officers and Directors** - Nathan Cressman, Magnussen Home

12:15 p.m. **Departure for Golf, Kayaking, Georgia Ports Tour and Cultural Heritage Museum Tour**

7:00 p.m. - 10:00 p.m. **Reception and Dinner** – Courtyard and Grand Ballroom

9:30 p.m. **AHFA Distinguished Service Award Presentation**
Farooq Kathwari, Ethan Allen



The American Home Furnishings Alliance traces its roots to one of the oldest trade associations in the United States, the North Carolina Case Workers Association. This organization was formed in 1905 with the

help of James T. Ryan, who served as director for 54 years. When Ryan retired in 1965, the Board of Directors of the then Southern Furniture Manufacturers Association created an honor in his name. The coveted accolade was known at the James T. Ryan Award for 20 years. In 1986, it was renamed the Distinguished Service Award. Its recipients are individuals who have contributed time and effort to improving the home furnishings industry and to advancing the mission and goals of the association. They are recognized leaders who have achieved excellence with their company and the industry while also contributing to their community.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 15

7:00 a.m. - 8:00 a.m. **Breakfast Buffet** – Carriage House

8:00 a.m. - 8:15 a.m. **Meeting Welcome** – Grand Ballroom
Andy Bray

8:15 a.m. - 9:00 a.m. **Global Economic Report and Outlook for 2026**
Mark Vitner, Piedmont Crescent Capital



In October 2022, Mark Vitner capped a 30-year career as managing director and senior economist for Wells Fargo's Corporate and Investment Bank and formed the consultancy Piedmont Crescent Capital where he tracks U.S. and regional economic conditions. He is highly regarded for his expertise in residential and commercial construction, regional economies and issues affecting small business.

Mark earned a B.B.A. in economics from the University of Georgia and an M.B.A. from the University of North Florida. He completed further graduate work in economics at the University of Florida and completed the National Association for Business Economics Advanced Training in Economics program at Carnegie Mellon University.

9:00 a.m. - 9:15 a.m. **Break**

9:15 a.m. - 10:15 a.m. **C-Suite Panel Discussion**
moderated by Ken Smith, retired Smith Leonard

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FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 14 - 10:30 a.m. - 11:15 a.m. [SCAD Faculty Panel Discussion](#)



Christine Van Duyn is the Chair of Interior Design at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), where she has served as a professor since 2018. An NCIDQ-certified designer with an M.F.A. in Interior Architecture and Design from The George Washington University and a B.F.A. in Photography from SCAD, Christine brings extensive industry experience to her academic leadership.

Prior to SCAD, she worked as a designer specializing in award-winning hospitality design, with a portfolio including Michelin-starred restaurants, nationally recognized cocktail bars and acclaimed dining establishments in major metropolitan markets. She continues her practice in Savannah, working with commercial clients on projects that emphasize branding, community and culture.

Sheila Edwards, professor of furniture design at SCAD since 2004, has been leading students in award-winning industry collaborations and international exhibitions, with work spanning ICFF, HD Expo, ISFD Pinnacle Awards and Milan Design Week. Her leadership on the AIA Georgia Honor Award-winning SCADpad and projects with partners such as Brown Jordan and 3form exemplify her cross-disciplinary approach to design education. Beyond her work in the classroom, Edwards has consulted on design projects throughout Savannah and shared her expertise through contributions to *Furniture Today*, *Apartment Therapy*, and *Livingetc*.



Jesús Rojas is an innovation strategist, creative executive and design leader serving as Vice President for SCADpro and Innovation at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD). In this role, he leads the university's globally recognized innovation studio, connecting SCAD's top-tier student and faculty talent with Fortune 100 partners to solve real-world challenges through bold, design-driven solutions. Jesús arrived at the university as an international student, earning his Master of Arts in product design after completing undergraduate studies in Venezuela.

Jesús has held a wide range of academic and leadership positions at SCAD, including industrial design professor, marine design coordinator, program chair, dean of academic services and vice president for academic services. Before joining SCAD, Jesús led design strategy and innovation workshops for global companies across Australia, Latin America and Europe. His international experience informs his dynamic approach to creative leadership, grounded in design thinking, interdisciplinary collaboration and an unwavering commitment to student success.

Dr. Geoffrey S. Taylor has served as the Dean of the School of Building Arts for eight years following his service as Dean of the School of Liberal Arts and as Chair of the art history department. He is an Affiliated Fellow at the American Academy in Rome, an Arthur Ross Advanced Research Fellow at the Institute of Classical Architecture & Art and recipient of the President's Research Award at Harvard University. Before joining SCAD, Dr. Taylor served as a research scholar in the Department of Drawings and Prints at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, a consulting project art historian for the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at The National Gallery of Art and the coordinating research fellow of the Vatican Topography Project at the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University.



Eleanor Twiford Larvan is the Associate Vice President of Career and Alumni Success at SCAD, where she connects SCAD talent with creative opportunities through strategic career advising and tailored recruitment events. Her expertise lies in program development for early-career creative professionals for students and alumni.

She has held several executive roles at SCAD, including Associate Vice President of Creative Direction, Associate Vice President of Public Relations and Marketing, and Director of SCAD Lacoste, the university's campus in Provence, France. Before joining SCAD, Eleanor worked as an editor at *ELLE Decor*, as promotions director at *Condé Nast Traveler*, and as special projects coordinator at *People* where she led the iconic "Sexiest Man Alive" campaigns. She later became the first Brand Creative Director for *LAKE*, where she built and led the creative team, overseeing art direction, photoshoots and brand strategy.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 15



9:15 a.m. - 10:15 a.m. **C-Suite Panel Discussion**
moderated by Ken Smith, retired Smith Leonard

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Mark Franklin is the CEO of second-generation, privately-owned Franklin Corporation based in Houston, Mississippi. With over 40 years of hands-on experience across every facet of the business, Mark has played a pivotal role in guiding the company through decades of growth and innovation. Mark holds a degree in Business Management from Mississippi State University and remains actively involved in shaping the company's long-term vision, values and performance.



Sean O'Connor is President of Universal Furniture International, a whole-home leader in casegoods and upholstery design known for its focus on design, quality and value. A third-generation industry leader, he helped transform Universal into a whole-home resource by launching its import upholstery business and acquiring a domestic upholstery operation in 2019, now relocating to a new manufacturing home in Hildebran, NC. He is a graduate of Lenoir-Rhyne University.

Derek Schmidt was appointed president of Flexsteel Industries in January 2024 and CEO in July 2024. He joined the company as CFO and COO in April 2020. Previously, he was the CFO of Crescent Electric Supply Co., following seven years with HNI Corporation, a leading global office furniture manufacturer. He also held financial leadership positions with Silgan Plastics Corporation, MasterBrand Cabinets and General Mills. He is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin with a BSBA in Accounting and Finance, and earned a MBA from the University of Minnesota.



Alex Shuford, III is the President and CEO of Century Furniture and Rock House Farm Family of Brands, Inc., the parent company of Century, Hickory Chair, Highland House Furniture, Hancock & Moore, Jessica Charles, Maitland Smith and Cabot Wrenn. He joined Century Furniture in 2000, following seven years of operating his own retail store group in Northern California. He is a graduate of Pomona College.

Melinda Whittington joined La-Z-Boy Incorporated in 2018 as senior vice president and chief financial officer, and was named president, CEO and a member of the board of directors in 2021. Last year, she was elected as the company's board chair. She has served in senior posts at Allscripts Healthcare Solutions and Kraft Foods following a 20-year career with The Proctor and Gamble Company. She is a graduate of The Ohio State University and is also a certified public accountant.



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10:15 a.m. - 11:30 a.m. [Inside the Designer's Mind: How to Become a Trusted Partner to the Trade](#)
Kaitlin Peterson, Business of Home

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Kaitlin Petersen is the editor in chief of Business of Home, the media of record for the home industry and the voice of authority for interior design professionals. Since 2017, she has directed the company's daily news coverage, podcast network, and quarterly print magazine. She is also the host of Trade Tales and Ask Us Anything, two podcasts that examine the unique challenges of creative entrepreneurship and offer designers tools and insights to build better businesses. Kaitlin has been writing about style and design for more than a decade, and her work has appeared in *Elle Decor*, *House Beautiful*, *Metropolitan Home* and *Veranda*, as well as *Chicago*, *Texas Monthly*, *Time Out New York*, and the international editions of *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*.

11:00 a.m. - 11:30 a.m. [Washington Update](#)
Bill Simmons/Chris Andresen, Dutko GR



Bill Simmons is a managing principal of Dutko GR and has led the government affairs counsel for AHFA since 2010. He started his career on Capitol Hill managing diverse issues including appropriations, transportation, higher education, energy, communications, taxes, banking, agriculture and the environment. Prior to joining the firm in 1999, Bill served as staff director for the House Resources' Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health under Chairman of the Resources Committee Don Young (R-AK). Bill also served as a legislative aide to Chairman Jim Hansen (R-UT). In addition, he has been an economic staff member for the National Association of Realtors; a marketing associate for Ivory & Company; and a stockbroker for P.B. Jameson & Company. Bill holds a Ph.D. from Western Governors University and received his B.A. degree from the University of Utah.

Chris Andresen is senior vice president at Dutko GR. He joined the firm in 2006 and works extensively with clients to identify policy opportunities and threats to create detailed legislative and executive strategies. His broad experience includes working with companies, universities, non-profits and trade associations specializing in workforce development, consumer products, manufacturing, retail, biotechnology, renewable energy, criminal justice, mental health, technology and higher education. He graduated from the University of Virginia with a B.A. degree in history and holds an M.B.A. from the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland.



12:00 p.m. [Departure for Golf and Architectural Walking Tour](#)

7:00 p.m. - 9:30 p.m. [Optional Progressive Group Dinner](#)

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 16 [Departures](#)

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AHFA ANNUAL MEETING
NOVEMBER 12 - 15, 2026



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