



The Arts Organizations at a Crossroads Toolkit:

Managing Transitions and Preserving Assets

Interview with Deborah Gilpin, President and CEO, Madison (WI) Children's Museum

Fall, 2021

The video recording of this interview is available here: https://youtu.be/_i4GXW5_fmE

Good morning. I'm Mollie Quinlan-Hayes with the National Coalition for Arts' Preparedness and Emergency Response, and the Performing Arts Readiness project, and happy to continue this series of interviews with leaders in the field about arts organizations at a crossroads. This morning I'm very happy to be speaking with Deborah Gilpin of the Madison Children's Museum, and Deb, would you please say hello, introduce yourself?

Deb: Hi everybody, it's such a pleasure to be here and an honor. I'm currently President and CEO of the Madison Children's Museum where I've been for eight years. This happens to be my hometown, but I lived away for 30 years where I was in the Boston area and Phoenix, in children's and science museums. So I have 34 years in museums. And 25 of those as a CEO.

M: Thanks again for being here. Why don't you tell us a little about the museum?

D: Madison Children's Museum is 40 years old and it continues to really be at the top of its game in terms of award-winning, it's typically among the top dozen child museums in the country, there are about 350 children's museums in the country, and we are proud to be a leader in so many ways. And the museum serves about 210,000 a year, in a typical year, [laugh] and has a budget of about \$3M. And over time has developed an endowment, and a reserves fund for the facility, and various things that a mature org should hopefully have in place. And we had about 74 employees and I'll speak later about the scale where we're at now.

M: Sure, and I know as part of your national work that you are connected with a couple of national museum networks and so you'll be bringing some of that knowledge and perspective to this conversation, is that right?

D: Yes, I served on the ACM [Association of Children's Museums] board, for many years, and continue to provide reviews and work with museums all over the country.

M: Well that's a wonderful wealth of knowledge and expertise you'll be bringing to our viewers.

Why don't you tell us a little about the museum's journey over the last year and a half, and kind of the big milestones that you've had to navigate in that time.

D: I think ours aren't dissimilar to what everyone else has been going through, but there was a very crisp moment in time when we shut down the museum, when we identified it was time, and we went from 74 employees, I laid off 54 employees, and ended up with 20 who worked half-time, essentially, for over a year.

We had a couple of contracts in place that helped support several staff, but we own our building and our block. So our focus was to preserve our assets, our physical, fiscal and human assets. And we identified that someone had to go in and run the elevator and the plumbing every week, to keep things from deteriorating: taking care of that building and that site.

So we went through initially that big downsurge. We got both cycles of PPPs [Paycheck Protection Program] which allowed us to initially bring many people back, and do a focused effort in the community of doing Sidewalk Surprises, which was bringing activity, physical activity, to children out in neighborhoods, and staff and volunteers did this in their own neighborhoods, during pandemic, and it had all kinds of elements because we're part of the City here.

Because we're in a downtown city, we're subject to many of the rules that a City follows. And that initially was an extremely difficult row to hoe, because they were changing very quickly, given COVID and the riots that were happening in our town, and protests; it was a fascinating time and as a leader extremely challenging, to keep our staff safe but also to figure out how are we going to still serve our community. And we ended up finding several pieces through this. One of them that maybe is quite different from others is that we identified that we should not be doing a lot of virtual programming. Our area is being hands on. There is a lot of online programming for children, and we felt that's just not our space, we shouldn't pick that up.

So we went through this period of a year or so, of maintaining, sustaining, and six months after the pandemic started we had identified that we should create a campaign that would fund both survival, and then thriving -- to reopen and moving forward to get playing outside. And we happened to have a project in place that we were underway already with the campaign and designs, to do an outdoor active play space. We narrowed it, we reduced its size, we identified how could we get this done by summer 2021, and we set to work and launched a \$4M campaign, last October.

And here we are a year later, October, and we're going to be opening that space, for outdoor play.

M: Congratulations.

D: Thank you. Yes. And what we found was that the community really engaged with finding a way they could support the museum through these times, but also really helped them to see how this was going to come back around to serving the community when we came out of our dark place again.

So I'll go back to our path. We reopened the museum in June of 2021 with very low capacity, low attendance, and that's basically where we've been holding open, but with limited hours and limited staff.

M: So your low attendance, I presume, is because you've set caps on that, not because of low demand, is that right? Or is it a mix?

D: It's both, it's both. The caps we set are far lower than what fire code and public health would allow, because we identified what we thought the comfort level would feel like. And people are really self-regulating that. We're very communicative about what it feels like in the space, and how we're limiting. Initially we used ticketing to determine that, and we don't need to ticket anymore. We can tell. People have a sense ... of they've changed their behavior of when they visit, because we've informed them about when it's busy.

M: Smart people in your community. Talk to me a little more about the new campaign, because I think that we're going to talk about board leadership and governance, but in this series, in my work on this project, I've been talking with board members and other executives, and there's been a spectrum, of course, in the ways that people have looked at fundraising or the lack of it in this time: everything from 'how dare we fundraise when there are so many health and little survival and social justice needs?' through, obviously, successes like yours. So can you talk us through that conversation that you had internally, and how that actually - and

obviously - played out successfully? But I'm sure it wasn't automatic, "Oh, yeah, let's go raise \$4 million." How did that conversation happen?

D: We made a very conscious effort to talk through how would we be perceived as we went to go fundraising, and should we even BE fundraising at this time. And at the beginning we didn't. We laid low. We invited organizations that had committed to sponsoring fall events to just convert that to be a donation. That was pretty easy. They'd already made those commitments and everyone agreed to that. And we didn't feel like that was extra fundraising, out when essential needs were so critical in our community.

But what we came to identify, by the time we launched this campaign, was that our role in the healing of our community, as we came out of that, was going to be critical. We were essential for that. So by fall, we floated the idea with a few of our major donors and community leaders, and they said that's exactly right. 'That's the resource we see you as in the community, we must be sure you're there to provide that.' So with the launch of the \$4M, half of that was all toward sustaining us, and getting us to the reopening, and reopening, in those initial months where revenue would be low. And then the second half was for creating the new space. And I'm not sure it would have been successful without the two combined. I think that both a PHYSICAL result, but also the community gathering and the link that we're offering.

M: That's a really interesting observation. And I would be remiss if I didn't put a plug in here for NCAPER [National Coalition for Arts' Preparedness and Emergency Response], the impetus behind this project, which if folks don't know, it's a national voluntary coalition of public and private agencies and individuals, to create a national safety net for artists and arts organizations. And it was birthed after Katrina and Rita, out of the belief that the arts are central to community healing. That all disasters are local, and only through local community work and connection, and artists are the best community connectors, can we all heal – so you've just become a great advocate for what our purpose is, so thank you.

D: in our case, the third word in our mission is Connect, so that is our priority and healing fits right in with that.

M: I know that it had to be one of the worst jobs in the world to be a CEO during the last year. So can you talk a little about how you managed - you and I have had multiple conversations, and I've just been awed by you so gracefully managed the anxieties and the needs of and the pain of your staff. Can you talk a little about how you approached your team during these difficult times?

D: It was of course an extremely hard time for CEOs. And so a couple of the things we did right off the bat, was we reached out to our peers, our networks, so the children's museums nationally, we meet weekly, still every other week, nationally, and around the world, in fact. And regionally, we have 15 children's museums in Wisconsin, and five more underway - we have more children's museums per capita than any other state - and we started weekly meetings as well. Both the CEOs had a meeting, but the educators of those organizations also started meeting. And that was just invaluable to all of us. But we all – my starting pint through all of this has been tied to kindness and humanity, and how do we support each other and get through this. And I think that showed up, in the work that people were willing to do to support the Museum, to ensure that it gets through it. They worked so hard through their own personal challenges, and we found ways to listen and support those, but also to let people have the space they needed.

M: What did that actually look and feel like? Obviously you couldn't all be together... that's one of the hardest parts, so how did you help folks manage that when you weren't able to be together?

D: This was part of the figuring out – that was really rewarding. Which is that – we in order to keep this very thin institutional knowledge, we were so down to one person knew how to do each thing, or less than that -

Was if you're really only working half time, how do we make sure you are NOT working the rest of the time. And we identified what days we would be working, how would we communicate our schedules, and then leave each other alone the rest of the time. And that was a really good practice that we're continuing to do now. And part of it has to do with saying that even though you're salaried, we're not expecting you to just work all of the time. We go for the 40-hour-a-week if you're full time, if that's what your commitment is. If you're doing more than that, then let's help you prioritize to get to that. And I think that's unusual in nonprofits. We tend to burn out that staff, and expect a lot more hours of them, and all of our people have personal lives that are very rewarding and bring richness to everything they do for the Museum, so we had to help them figure out that part of their lives as well.

M: That's great. I know also that you took this time to step back and, knowing that you would come out of this with a smaller staff, something you've said is going to be typical for the museum field and maybe the arts in general ... you've said you need to shift your expectations, also speaking to that thinness of institutional memory, and as part of this toolkit we're offering a section on Knowledge Capture and Transfer, this idea of how do you build in both the mindset and the time to have that download time, that sharing time .. so it's not that only one person knows how to fix the boiler, one person who knows when to call the elevator company, or just one person that has a relationship with your major foundation.

So I know that that was primary in your mind, both that and dealing with some hierarchical issues. So I'd love you to talk about that and how that realization came to you and how you've been shifting some of the internal capacity issues.

D: Leadership as we went through the pandemic and had our senior team discussions, we had already identified that we were a little bit siloed, and we were not just top-heavy but overstaffed. We were producing 1,200 programs a year, and we didn't have good accountability, and good metrics, for how we make decisions about our activities. We love our community, we saw great things we could do and we kept trying to do everything. It was a little bit of a function of – we had moved into a bigger museum ten years prior, and you say “YES!” to everything. But it was time to start saying “No” more. So we had recognized this. And the pandemic really brought this amazing opportunity to reset all that. So as we began to do our strategy, which was January [2020] when it got a little more solidified, when we could see that there was a re-opening in sight, we did strategic work with the Board, and identified that using a “Measure What Matters” model, a more data-driven evidence-based decision making of what we would and wouldn't do, and how we would respond to what we learn as the changing scenario happened as we reopened, was the way to go.

So we identified very crisp objectives and key results, that the board and staff agreed on, and some are higher level like having how many months of operating cash in the bank, which we won't know until a rolling number of months, and others are we want a net promoter score of 75%, once we start opening the doors again, or we want to collect surveys from at least 50% of the visitors... so we initiated all these things as we opened, and we trained staff, and they really have had to learn how to flex different muscles, to get to these outcomes,

But what it's done is given them a sense of control and knowledge, transparency, about the outcomes and how it might shape their job later; because we can identify merit raises better, with this accountability, we can do that better, they're watching as the surge may come now, and looking at what they already know about our condition, and they don't feel as stressed as I think I'm hearing from other organizations, because they know the dollars involved, they know that we're making our number on the revenue per person through the front door because they're tracking it themselves, every week, meeting about it and changing their behaviour to change those outcomes.

M: That's true, it really gives them a sense of power. And you've said that it's also it's freeing you up to do other things, and it's striking to me, it seems that with a smaller staff, you actually are building more capacity. Is that - do you think that's an accurate statement?

D: Yes and it is very intentional. It's really about empowering more people to make decisions. I think over time it's had gotten where decisions get pushed up were pushed to the leadership more frequently and we recognized we have great people, we didn't need – we needed to shift that. And part of bringing some of the front line people back – we weren't sure we were going to bring the experienced. the prior employees back, and we did end up bringing them back, but we really worked with them to say the culture's going to be different, and you need to be on board for it. And they were and they have been. And it's been a beautiful thing to watch. And I don't think without a really significant reset it would have happened as successfully. It's not something you can do incrementally very easily. It really is just a big switch that we're all on board for.

M: We'll ask you to speak to a couple of very granular things that I think are really interesting lessons for the rest of us in the field. Talk about your how you reapproached compensation and pipelines for junior staff or entry level staff, if you would.

D: So we pretty much threw the organizational chart out the window and said “we're a startup now.” Get everybody doing the things we need doing, and we'll figure out what departments are six months later. So that's a little exaggeration, but we took marketing as front desk staff and floor staff in education, we made a visitor services area for now, and those front line levels were \$10 an hour, which in our region is appropriate, but we bumped that up to \$14 hour; and we also converted more to fulltime positions, instead of part-time, so that they would get benefits. And we had known we should do this in the past, we just couldn't make the jump. So that's been a wonderful thing to do. And now what we're doing is we realized that this has created compression for everyone above, and we're doing a formal comp study now with a contractor to look at the other pay ranges and by the beginning of our Jan 1 [2022] next budget cycle we will be implementing – even if we can't do it all at once in this budget cycle, we'll have a plan to level it up.

M: Talk about your new cross training opportunities and how you have built that in and incentivized it.

D: So one of the things that happened is we lost people with really important knowledge. So for example we had a very active facility rental program, we would have 20 weddings a year, and executive cocktail hours, and all kinds of things. Well all of that was gone, and it's not back yet either. Although we have a dozen people who've kept their wedding deposits with us, and are now going to have their weddings on our site, outside, and we don't have any of that staff anymore, they're all gone. And it's not appropriate to bring them all back we don't have the job to give them, it's not enough of a consistent job.

So that's one area where we've said to everyone who's already on staff, would you like this other piece, of your job as part of the hours you work, to serve this other revenue driving area. And they're raising their hands. And I think of this as juice. It's the thing you don't do in your normal everyday job, that is fun for you, and different. But it makes you a better staff member in all ways. Then, anytime someone trains in a new area for a new skill they get a pay bump. Then you become part of that larger pool of people who can be staffed for that activity.

M: That gives you so much more flexibility and resiliency at the end of the day.

D: Yeah. It's going to be interesting to see over time as some of those people would leave, they now hold a lot of institutional knowledge as well. But what we hope it means is that there are more layers for every area of knowledge.

M: Talk about your karma committee.

D: Yeah, that's something we formed when I got there. We had it in Phoenix as well, I started it there. It's really just good karma among the staff. So we hand it off to some group, of five or six people on staff, who agree to serve on it for two years. We give them a budget, and they do whatever they think will be great for us. So we have things like salsa chip dipoffs, contentst/competitions, or let's all go bowling, social events ... not so much things like employee of the year. It's just more fluid, and one of them, they come up with these, and they use their budget for it, and the budget was a really freeing thing for them, and the budget's not a lot, it's like \$400, not a lot of money, but they do so much with it. We have a critter, a chameleon plush that secretly travels around to different people's offices or places of work, and when you get it, you need to take a picture of it with you somewhere in your life outside the museum, and post it to staff, and then you pass it on to someone else, secretly, and it really means we learn about each other. And it's not like Facebook, but it does connect people in that way.

So there's little things like that that I would never have come up with.

M: Sounds like a great place to work. Let me know when you're hiring!

So you couldn't do this with your own CEO magic wand, you have a board of directors, so why don't we shift to that, and if you could talk first a bit about their role, your engagement with them, I know they've had to walk a very difficult path along this, and then we'll talk about your planning. But let's start with your journey with them.

D: The board journey was so fascinating. So we had a large board, I had 23 board members at the time that this happened. And initially, the first six months there were five or six of them that gave us so much time. They were the ones, the Finance, who helped us find every resource that we could find, and also did all the crunch work of getting the data there, to secure these dollars ... this level of producing government grants and applications, and none of us was used to working at that level ...

And someone who was HR at a major company, helped so much behind the scenes in terms of what I would say to staff, what we were promising and not promising and all that, so that was incredible, and then it got kind of dark, they were not as engaged, we were all Zooming in for these meetings, and we couldn't -- we just disconnected. So by spring it was really dysfunctional, and I think the last of the convos in the spring were very fiduciary, there was not generative thinking, there was not strategic thinking happening on the board, together as a group, and then as we reopened we had our first in person meeting in June, ended up being hybrid and that was really challenging, so we're still working on that... but we've dropped down to a much smaller board, we're now at 19 members, and we've agreed that that's good and we should get even smaller -- and partly that has to do with we were in a campaign mode, before, so we needed a larger board. And we're also carving down to no more than four committees, and we'll do ad hoc or TF -- so some of this is best practices we've been hearing about from BoardSource and others for years, about the way boards should operate, and similarly with the board, it's a moment in time to bring about those changes.

M: I just want to observe one thing which is, to look at the size of your board as a fluid thing, and I think -- so well as you said with the staff too, you get to a certain point, and you just find the work to fill that, or you let all of that conversation happen at a board meeting because everyone needs to have their voice heard, and that's great, but ... there comes a time when you need those things to ebb and flow, and to recognize and say that explicitly gives you the power to move, and it takes the personal away from it. I think it's an important thing, as a board and staff member myself, to recognize.

D: I want to add, too, I serve on the board of a nature center and nature preschool, and we had done strategic planning, and everything -- I led that committee, and as we came through the pandemic, everything we had decided played out so beautifully, because we opened the nature preschool in fall of 2020, so kids outside, so there was such this lack of childcare, and here we had this preschool where they were outside all day. Such an

important service to the community. But watching that board behave completely differently than my board at the Museum. It's a much smaller board, and they were very tight through all of this, and they stayed on the higher level. And I think part of it is because they were a smaller board. And I give kudos to that ED, he really communicated in the best possible way to us as board members. I think he did a better job in choosing what he invited board members in to be a part of, and what he took care of.

M: I will add to this article for viewers some URLs, a link to the wonderful BoardSource book that talks about these different phases of board work, moving from fiduciary to strategic to generative, and if that's not a concept you're familiar with, it's a wonderful convo to have and way to look at your growth over time.

<https://boardsource.org/product/governance-leadership-reframing-work-nonprofit-boards/>

Strategic planning, right?!? Not the same as it was a year ago. What has your strategic planning been like in terms of your horizon for planning, and how your conversations have been different than before?

D: We've been doing this very limited time-frame, we basically did a six-month strategic plan last spring, and we called it "Opening Season." Now we're moving into how do we extend it longer. So on the one hand, we're planning no creating quarterly timelines of objectives and key results, but then also creating the overlying 2-3 or maybe 3-5 year plan, with full Board involvement... So tying the two together, and one of the things that happened with us, speaking of Board members' roles, we have a Board member who is with a major insurance firm who does this [process], they're called Ignite, they do this -- sometimes it's LEAN, sometimes it's Sigma Six, it's these productive ways of approaching your business. And we have been getting volunteer coaching and training, all through this, and they will lead our strategic work coming forward as well with board and staff. So our hope is to work through this winter, by January/February [2022] to be at a place where we see a 2-3 year plan ahead of us. And we don't know how much detail it's going to be able to have. But we do know that if we want to do a major exhibition, it takes 2-3 years to create one. So I know that's one pin in the calendar that we'll be putting in there.

D: The other one that's going to stand out is a commitment to ensuring and evaluating how we are helping our comm heal. That this is a priority role for us, so how do we know if we're succeeding at it.

M: So it is feasible to do strategic planning in our time. I was talking with a client yesterday, a theatre/presenting org in Pennsylvania, and they were talking about the fact that they did all this scenario planning: financially, staff-wise, programmatically; what if COFID lasts forever, or what if we can't open ... but all of the re-openings were [based on] when COVID went away. The one scenario was not that we are going to reopen AND COVID is still here.

D: Right.

M: So is that a conversation that you all had?

D: We don't do scenario planning. I do think the way we're thinking about our strategy work is about deciding on a strategic position, so it's the *approach* we will take for things, not so much about *what* we will do.

D: Access and diversity? Inclusion and equity?

M: Yes, please talk about that. As you mentioned, CVOID and all of this need to look at our work, our need to look at work and social justice combined, and I know that you were very thoughtful about that.

D: We had done quite a bit of work in the last six years, working with the Cultural Competency Learning Inst, and having racial justice training for all of the staff, changing our practices. We had been getting a lot of notoriety in our community and region, in the business community that was looking to us for how could

they diversify their staffs, and we had we had made so much progress over the years. So we did it through very focused and intentional programs. One for example was a teen workforce program, where in five years we had 60 students, teens of color, high schoolers, come through as summer workforce, fully paid staff, with support systems in place, meetings with leaders of color in our community, so they could get all the pieces that it would take to support a teenager in their first job ... the things we learned through our initial evaluations, where some of these kids said “I’ve never been to the Square; my family does not come downtown.” And now, they and their siblings and their family come and play in the Museum, or they come to see their sibling working, and it’s changed the trajectory of these families, travel in the community in the wider community than the neighborhoods that they lived in.

So in any case, when I laid off 54 people, we were left with no one of color, no one who was not binary, mostly women, and that was the most heartbreaking thing for me, of all the metrics that we, of all that happened with our people. So as we rebuilt, we’re now up to 31 staff – we won’t go back up to 70, we’ll maybe get to 45 when we’re busy again. But we had to work really hard to sustain that diversity, and it helped. We have been able to bring back a diverse staff, and I would say that it’s the number one commitment we have to how we’re rehiring, because people were noticing what we did, and there’s no reason to step backward from that. Especially as we want to be – what we saw happen when we were doing well in this area was that our visitors also changed, our visitors became more diverse, and the perception of us in the community as an organization shifted.

M: Certainly those years of trust and relationships you built up, I’m sure, is the way you’re able to attract those new staff members now.

D: Staff, and also just in addition, is the partnership we have with community agencies, is really how we initially gained trust by those populations. So that was some of the first outreach we did this spring, to say we’re going to be opening again. It’s ticketed, and that’s complicated with underserved families, so how can we do this in a way that they’re going to know they’re welcome and they’ll come? And we worked very closely with them, and they were so happy to hear from us, and they also, they’ve been through their own journeys through all of this, so they were thrilled to have the partnership come back very easily.

M: Sure. And as I recall in one of our earlier conversations, because I know you’re in an urban center, and that you – was it a Y? That they’re across the street and it [visitorship] had just never happened. Can you tell that story?

D: Yeah, the YWCA is across the street, and when I arrived eight years ago the families weren’t visiting, and they get in free. So this is 133 individuals with about 60 children under the age of 8 in that major building. They weren’t visiting. It’s 62 steps. So I walked on over there, and knocked on the door, talked with the director, and asked “why aren’t you coming?,” why the clients weren’t coming. And we identified that racism was a key part of it. The way they felt when they arrived, the way other visitors treated them, the way our staff behaved, the way they had to pull out their “poor card” to show to get in, and so basically we completely changed our access system to not cause poverty shaming. You don’t have to show us your documents. We do ask to say why you qualify based on eligibility criteria, but we changed the way their cards look, they look just like membership cards that other people have, and we also invited them and other partners like this to come to things that would help them get comfortable in the space, and we went there with programming. So it really rebuilt into where we, we’re neighbors, we’re family now with this population, and they feel that way too. We’ve hired staff, from women who live there at the Y who work for us, and it really took a long effort, but it took noticing “what’s the problem here?” and being willing to listen to it with an open mind and not be defensive.

M: And I think having worked in children’s museums and children’s theaters in my career, it’s challenging because your audience is always ‘growing out,’ so you have to have relationships with organizations and

channels, it's really important because your one-on-one relationships with them go away ... until they have their own kids and hopefully bring them back.

D: And they have organization's behavior just like we do, so once there's a culture in the organization about thinking of the Children's Museum of a partner and neighbor and friend, that transmits to new people. One of the things they also told us is they don't really use the parks nearby, so those kids are not getting out in nature. They really wish they had a backyard, and our thinking about this new space that we're building, it'll be their backyard.

M: Lovely! I think we've talked through a lot of the questions. Anything else you think touches on these issue about being at a crossroads, transitions, changes...

D: One of the things that stands out to me, is we had a small group of our leadership team that went so far above and beyond, and it wasn't they always do but it really stood out in this case. It wasn't so much that they worked all the time, but that they thought outside of the box, and gave each other the room to do that and didn't go down in the weeds all the time. We did that visioning time constantly. What if we did this? What if we did that? And made decisions about it. And we're very agile about how we do thing. And I think that made a difference, having a little crew of people who really were able to make that happen. They were the ones I made sure I also took care of during this, that they were getting what they need, because they were doing it for the rest of the staff.

M: Credit where credit is due.

Thank you so much, this has been a pleasure, and really appreciate your sharing so much of your story and wisdom and the things you recognized needed to be fixed and how you went about that. I think people will really appreciate hearing your story.

D: We've been very grateful for how the Madison Children's Museum has been able to come through this, and how the community came together to make that happen.

M: Thanks, and best wishes on the opening of your new back yard.

More resources:

[*The Arts Organizations at a Crossroads Toolkit: Managing Transitions and Preserving Assets*](#)

More articles and case studies: www.performingartsreadiness.org

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