

Transcript of Interview with Amanda McMullen by Grace Woodward

Interviewee: Amanda McMullen

Interviewer: Grace Woodward

Date: 07/14/2020

Location (Interviewee): New Bedford, Massachusetts

Location (Interviewer): Maryland, USA

Abstract: Amanda McMullen, President and CEO at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the museum.

Grace Woodward 0:00

That and Zoom makes it super easy. So that should be totally excellent. And then just before we get started, let me... actually give me one second. I'm gonna move to a quieter location.

Amanda McMullen 0:17

No worries.

Grace Woodward 0:30

I won the spot! They're gonna leave, and I'm gonna stay.

Amanda McMullen 0:34

There ya go.

Grace Woodward 0:36

Excellent. Okay, so just before we get started. I was wondering if you could introduce yourself and a little bit about what you do at the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

Amanda McMullen 0:47

Sure, happy to. My name is Amanda McMullen. I am the President and CEO of the New Bedford Whaling Museum and have been in that position for just over two years. And with that role, I'm responsible for the whole show, everything. I don't do everything, but I'm responsible for everything and oversee a staff of about 42 people full-time and part-time. And the museum itself is home to many spectacular collections and artifacts and visited by over 100,000 people annually.

Grace Woodward 1:26

Awesome. That's sweet, yeah. And just, my name is Grace Woodward. And I'm doing this oral history project with the— sort of this like COVID-19 archive, it's sort of grown out of ASU, Arizona State University, and it's become— started to incorporate a lot of universities across the U.S.. And we're really thinking about how do you document this moment? And how do we talk about what's going on in the world right now? So I'm super excited to be able to chat with you about it and my focus mostly has been on cultural institutions and museums and how they're coping and how they're dealing with things and how they're supporting their community within the museum and outside of the museum.

Amanda McMullen 2:05

Yeah, those are all- all great topics and things that we've been working pretty hard at. So happy to chat more.

Grace Woodward 2:12

Excellent. So I wonder if we could sort of start like, basic kind of stuff like, what were some of the big changes you guys have seen at the New Bedford Whaling Museum during COVID?

Amanda McMullen 2:23

Yeah, it's been— I'm sure everyone you're talking to is going to say it has been a crazy four months. Um, you know, for us the moment that we were in, right, you know, everyone's going to talk about pre-COVID and post-COVID. And for us, we had actually just concluded six months of strategic planning with a really active group of our staff, our leadership team, and then a committee of 14 different trustees. And we had presented the strategic plan, really our sort of vision for growth over the next five years, on Friday, March 6, and then on Friday, March 13, I closed the museum to the public. So it was this amazing, I don't know dichotomy in all sense of it. And so we- we are a pretty nimble group, I think the size of our museum and organization. It's a very close knit staff, I had mentioned, it's 40 plus of our total staff, but it's really a core of about 25 full-time employees. And so it's a tight group. And we knew, we sort of saw and we all saw it coming the end of February and we sort of knew early March, we needed to get ourselves ready to pivot to remote realities and be prepared for kind of the what ifs. And so when we did close to the public, we were in really good shape from a remote setup standpoint. But we also knew in the next two weeks, we needed to get our programming and our content and, particularly, our education resources because we knew immediately our education team that was used to bringing in and supporting school groups was now going to have to support a community of educators that had a different structure for themselves. So within two weeks, which was remarkable, and it was kind of all hands on deck, we created and launched an entire portion of our website called “Museum from Home” that had things for the art lover for the historian, just your general museum buff, that would not be able to come through our doors anymore, but it had a build out of a lot of programs from a student standpoint, an adult learning standpoint, and particularly resources to help educators. So there was such urgency in the first few weeks to months of what can we do, how do we connect with everybody? How do we share our collection and our content? So the beginning part was just the urgency of getting up and running. And then it became the immediate pieces from where I was and sort of my leadership team of how do we survive this? And how do we use our strategic plan as a roadmap, the things we wanted to do around digital, we were doing and so some things that we had said we're going to be three years out, all of a sudden we did them in, you know, we got them started, at least, in two weeks time. So it became a labyrinth of how do we- how do we navigate this financially? I will be honest, I mean, my guiding thing always was this is a public health crisis first, and I have to keep employees— we— there were four things, it was my mantra, safe, employed, insured and productive. And it was like that was our driving philosophy on how we were going to tackle this. And we have not done any layoffs. We have not furloughed a single person, we've kept the team whole which is pretty extraordinary, I think in these immediate moments. Yeah.

Grace Woodward 6:05

Yeah. Oh my gosh, that's, like, amazing to hear. I feel like that is not every museum's tale they're able to tell.

Amanda McMullen 6:11

No, not at all.

Grace Woodward 6:13

Do you feel like there are things that you guys had in place that allowed that retention of staff in particular?

Amanda McMullen 6:18

Yes. We had a number— our financial makeup is actually really— I think, in so many ways it worked. It was like the perfect moment for us. If you're gonna— if you're gonna plan for a pandemic, we were ready for it in a couple of different ways. Number one, 2019 was our strongest fundraising year in the last six years. So we had ended a really— our fiscal year ends in December, December 31. So we were— we were well positioned financially from a cash flow standpoint. So that's a big piece for us. Another big piece for us, as lots of museums you'll probably be talking to, have grant related projects that go over a couple of years, so we had a number of them that were either in their first year or a second year, but it had a third year to it. So I was able to parcel out coverage of staff, really coverage of our payroll, that— that was already in place through grants, which was great. Another piece that's really sort of fascinating is one of our strategic plan goals is we wanted to grow the number of people who came and visited the museum, you know, you want to be able to reach more folks, have more impact. And one of those pieces was also grow the revenue line of people who come to the museum to pay. So we do get about 100,000 visitors a year, it ends up— really our seasonal cycle of visitors, the biggest chunk of them come from April to October. And when someone comes through the front door, whether for a lecture or they're coming to a rental or some other type of program, or they're coming just to the museum, that whole revenue line is about 1.2 million dollars out of a four and a half million-dollar budget. So unlike other museums that are so dependent on people coming through their front door, we have different revenue streams that can help us offset when we had to close those doors. So those are sort of the three biggest factors, our multiyear grants, our fundraising heft, and the fact that our door— our door revenue, our take from the door is not 90% of our operating budget. So that actually put us in about as decent a position as you could be to enter this moment. And then financially we did apply for the— the CAREs Act came through and I— literally, Grace— I remember the Thursday night the Senate was voting on it. I was up to one o'clock to watch every single senator vote and I was like, “Oh my god, we're gonna make it!” Because you just you know, we knew we knew we had all those things in our favor, but you just knew it wasn't gonna be enough, and I wanted to make sure we could weather this and— and I also wanted to understand all the constructs that Congress would put on it, you know, what was it going to mean? What did we have to adhere to? And all of it just matched up perfectly with where we were, you know, the goal of PPP is essentially payroll protection. It was designed to encourage you to keep your staff and so knowing that that was our philosophy and knowing that this stimulus aid package was going to be consistent with our beliefs was just a huge relief and we did— we received that in April, mid-April, and it's— it I mean, it's a massive— to know that you had eight weeks of payroll that was covered just gave you a huge lift, huge lift.

Grace Woodward 9:44

Yeah, that's so awesome. And I was wondering too, you spoke a lot about like educational resources being developed and I feel like a big time for this has been like those words like "pivoting." Like everyone changing on both like your level at the museum, but then also down to frontline staff doing different jobs, like, there's not tickets to take. I was wondering if you could speak a little bit about that, about how your— some of your staff, who may— or like who work in collections— who maybe didn't have an obvious thing to do at home with their day to day.

Amanda McMullen 10:15

I had kick them out, you know, the governor shut it down. And it may, you know, essential staff, we certainly had people who were in, we always had some degree, probably about 20%. That would be on a different schedule coming through from a security standpoint, from a facility standpoint, we did have members of our collections team who would be coming in to monitor for all the things you'd need to monitor. Insects, we certainly didn't want some, you know, we didn't want a moth outbreak in the museum. That would be really bad. So we did have people who were coming in. But it was you know, if you are a curator of maritime history and your research, your body of research is all the books in the museum, we can't take our reading room and move that home for you. So we certainly got creative with folks in terms of their remote reality. And I mean, the best story I can tell you is so organic. It wasn't anything I directed or instructed, I ended up hearing about two weeks into our completely remote scenario, that our front desk team, who to your point, we're closed, they're not collecting tickets, they're not giving out audio guides. There's no welcoming of people. They had actually taken it upon themselves to go on to our online resources and do our 12-week docent tutorial program, which is our training program for docents every year when we bring on a new docent group who learn every aspect of our gallery and our collections, and they decided that that would make them stronger in their role of hosting people when they come back to the museum when they welcome people. So it was completely organic, they knew online that we had this 12-week course and so they took it upon themselves to- to learn more about the galleries so that they could be more informed when we opened our doors back up, so there were some really cool things like that that have happened. There's no question— the interesting thing in our strategic plan is that, you know, we have your traditional departments that work really cohesively together between education and curatorial. And there's a lot of overlap. There's, you know, the curators are obviously envisioning the displays the installation, understanding the collection, and then they really work with education about how does that get translated from a learning standpoint. And we have a head of digital initiatives who sort of floats between those departments, sits in education primarily. But our strategic plan kept saying we really need to up the game on digital experience at the museum. And so this moment right now has- has been— it's been so successful in engaging new audiences for us and sustaining our existing audience. And I just think the reality is, people are going to be on Zoom or whatever your platform is for a while. And I don't think we will ever do another program or lecture series or anything that doesn't have a virtual component to it. So that will be a need we continue to grow.

Grace Woodward 13:15

Yeah, I think that's a really excellent point to thinking about the future. Who knows what will happen in a month? And who knows what'll happen in a year or even five years? And what—that's gonna look like for an institution in terms of in person content versus digital content?

Amanda McMullen 13:31

Totally. And what's education going to look like? Like what schools you know, depending on districts, they may come back online, they may come back in person. You know, I am not anticipating school groups knocking down the door, you know, September 3. And so we have to continue, we actually are just, literally in this moment, having these conversations of what does that mean for us to continue to pivot? And how do we continue to figure out what the community needs are even in anticipation of schools not necessarily knowing what they're doing. And, you know, how do we remain nimble so that we can support our schools really effectively. We're really lucky in New Bedford, we have a very strong partnership with the New Bedford Public Schools and in the surrounding areas. We actually already partner with the New Bedford Public School district on science curriculum for fourth and sixth grade. And so a lot of it is about what is it for the museum to get out of our walls, and we can't necessarily assume students will come in, and we won't necessarily have 10,000, 12,000, 13,000 students every year but- but can we reach that many students by going beyond our walls?

Grace Woodward 14:41

Yeah, excellent. It's exciting to see that you guys are having that conversation happening. And has that been happening on like an exhibition planning level or is that mostly been happening in education?

Amanda McMullen 14:54

You know, it's on all levels. The leadership team, the group that reports into me- and just for a plug, it's all female lead at the museum. It's all women it's and- where there's absolute space for the male voice at the museum for sure. But it's really actually kind of interesting and fun to be part of an all-female leadership team and be guiding and leading all women. So the Chief Curator, the Head of Education, they are on the leadership team, our Head of Fundraising and obviously Philanthropy, on the leadership team, our Chief Financial Officer, and Chief- she's the Chief Financial Officer and Administrative Officer, on the leadership team, and our Head of Marketing and Outreach and all of our community relations. So that's the group that's really you know- I work with them to kind of set the vision and sort of say and say things like, "I don't think education is going to look the same" and lean into their expertise. You know, our Head of Education is- she has been in a classroom, she's been an instructor, she's been a curriculum designer. She is the person, actually, she was promoted into this position at the New Bedford Whaling Museum. She really transformed a high school apprenticeship program that we had with high school apprentices who are in the museum every single day, and developing a really close relationship with that cohort. So she certainly knows youth development and youth programming. She's the content expert, you know, I can sort of set a vision for how I think and want it to look. But I have to rely on their expertise. And I'm incredibly lucky to have a group of people who are so talented, smart and skilled, that- that they will help guide and shape any- any direction we're going in. And they also are incredible supervisors. So they have these great teams that are looking to them for in turn their guidance and their direction. And that was a lot of how we did the strategic plan. It was really important that the leadership team was an active participant in the strategic planning and defining the shape of the museum for the next many years.

Grace Woodward 16:52

Awesome. That's really exciting to hear and also love a female leadership team!

Amanda McMullen 16:58

I know it's— I mean, it's like, it just really is that way, it's sort of kind of what I came into and then we did have one transition, and I did promote Christina, our Head of Education, because I was like, “Why aren't you running education? You're brilliant.” So it ended up sort of being by luck that we've continued to have all women.

Grace Woodward 17:16

That's awesome. Yeah, yeah. I think one of the things I was wondering, and I guess I focus on staff, but we'll eventually switch out, but this in terms of you— What is like if you guys have like a cafeteria or your security or like, you mentioned facilities? I think that's one of the places that goes a little bit unrecognized in museums, unless you're in the museum and you really are realizing that's like this unrecognized world. I wanted to also just like, question how that's going too?

Amanda McMullen 17:48

They're the— I mean, the areas you're identifying, we don't actually have a cafeteria. We don't have a cafe at all. There's so many restaurants in the immediate downtown area that I think it almost seemed absurd years ago when doing new building construction to even compete with them or to even, you know, be bothered because there's so many ways to go. But no, you're talking about kind of the skeleton that keeps everything in shape for the museum. Our facilities team is extraordinary. We actually— so we open to members last week. So just last Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday was our first sort of venturing back into incredibly reduced capacity. And we had an all staff Zoom today, and we were celebrating the work of the facilities team, especially. I mean that the herculean efforts that they put into motion to, I mean, literally we did some physical changes where I was moving doors to the museum shop so we could have a different exit and they pulled all of it off, on time, beautifully. One of our facilities members was so excited that— there was the first family that came through our doors was a dad with his two young kids and there's a picture of them on Instagram and he's kind of bending down. I mean, they're maybe like two and four so he's crouched down at their level. And our blue stone tile in the lobby is like shining and glitz—like, it looks like water. It's so incredibly sparkly clean. And he was so excited that that was on Instagram. And we were all celebrating the efforts because— it, that, they're the backbone of the organization. You know, from everything from mechanicals to making the— all our systems run, our security, our alarming, every, every step of the way are huge. And it's a small team. So it is definitely like everyone's rolling up their sleeves. Our Curator of Maritime History, you know, he's the one who's building out— we have a big sort of cotton- a barrel of huge cotton that had been on display in one of our textile galleries to just talk about the textile industry in New Bedford and Fall River and we knew we needed to take that out, the kind of thing where every kid wants to pull the cotton, which is fine on a sensory standpoint. And, you know, if we weren't in a pandemic, having all these little hands touching a bay of cotton would be fine. But we knew that would have to come out. Well, Mike Dyer, Curator of Maritime History, also incredible installation artist and woodworker, had basically rebuilt out an entire new display for where that cotton had been. So there's a— this is a group of people who no one is saying, “Oh, that's not in my job description. I'm not going to do that.” So it was definitely an all hands on deck approach for sure. That even, frankly, extended to our

volunteers and docents who are mostly retired, and certainly of an age group that I thought would not feel comfortable being out in a pandemic. You know, a little bit more of a high-risk group and we've had over a dozen of them who have said, "No, no, no, I want to come in and help. What can I do?" So it's the kind of spirit that we've got at the museum that I feel very fortunate to be surrounded by.

Grace Woodward 21:03

Yeah, that is awesome. And also congratulations on reopening and I have seen you guys were doing that which is like exciting, but probably overwhelming and maybe...

Amanda McMullen 21:18

It's totally exciting. I mean, in so many ways we've all felt like a museum should just not be silent. You know, it's about our relationship as a host and as a place to learn and discover. So, quiet galleries have just felt wrong on so many levels. But, I will say there's such a level of responsibility, you know, when I- when we've been bringing staff back in a phased approach, you know, I knock on wood, I don't even want to say necessarily out loud, everyone's healthy, you know, and again, the immediate driver for me is safety for folks and that level of responsibility of safely overseeing the museum, safely guiding the staff, but then safely welcoming in our visitors is, it's like, it's a- I am not sleeping, basically, like it's a heavy, heavy responsibility and that's okay. That's I mean that- that's the job I've signed up for. But, I think that the- the relief of getting through four days with a smaller crowd, happy that it's small, we are at 25% capacity, which is like 100 people at any given time, which is fine. We did herculean efforts to set up an online system so that people could reserve their times and then we were really nervous about compliance with the rules. We've all been watching you know, grocery stores where employees are getting screamed at and videotaped with someone who refuses to wear face covering. And we did lots of training, we actually did a whole customer service, a conflict resolution training for folks, we did Q&A, and prepped our whole team, because we knew we'd all at any given time be on the floor. So I feel like we were prepared for it. We supported the team, I'm happy to tell you, we didn't even have to give out one single disposable mask because everybody came in with a face covering. And everyone came in knowing what our expectations were and what are, you know, what was going to be this compact between visitor and the museum? So, so far, so good and I do feel like we're well prepared. Should that not be the case? But there's a heavy responsibility with it for sure.

Grace Woodward 23:41

Yeah. And what kind of measures have you guys taken within the museum? Like, are there little bubbles people can stand on or how does that look for this?

Amanda McMullen 23:50

Yeah, I mean, I will say we spent we spent more money on signage than I've probably ever spent on signage. So there's a lot of communication from right online, right from the get go. But then if you were to walk up to our Plaza, you will see a number of different signage, you know, sort of A frame sandwich board type signs explaining to you what you're going to be walking into. And one of the fun things that we actually did. The museum's- I mean we're a real leader in the New Bedford community and we took that responsibility very seriously with the whole entire onset of the pandemic. We have a cupola that we lit initially at night, it's the highest

point in downtown, and we had a light artist come in and light it with this very calming blue and we said we're in solidarity riding through the storm. One of the other community efforts we really leaned into was we raised money for frontline workers at a local hospital by creating a "Be like a Blue Whale" t-shirt, as blue whales social distance all the time. They never come close to each other. They communicate over long, long distances far more than six feet and we just thought that was fun to play around with so we did a T-shirt to raise money. So we kept the be like a blue whale theme in our signage at the museum So, you, if you hadn't purchased a ticket, you could actually scan and go directly from a QR code to the websites. And so you were reminded and reinforced every step of the way. We do have, you know, if a line builds up at the front desk we have, they're actually little, tiny little mats that we can pick up and throw back down. So we can— so they wouldn't stick necessarily and be there forever. And we could space them out if we needed to, or put them out on the plaza we can do that. We created, as much as possible— the whaling museum is ten buildings cobbled together over about two city blocks. Five of those buildings are historic. So there's some really tiny little passageways that's really hard to create either a one-way passageway, or it's just almost impossible to get people that aren't walking by each other shoulder to shoulder so, what we did though, is designed with directional resources, as well as some people and sort of crowd control. We call them deckhands. So if you were going to come, you're going to be all hands on deck and be a deckhand. And we created these positions to just sort of help move people through. There's a few pain points where we physically need someone to say, "I need you to stop here, this group is going to cross first and then you can go." So what we had done is really orchestrate where were those pain points going to be? How many positions did we need on the floor? But then we really did engineer, to the degree that we could almost a one-way pathway through the whole museum. We have three different elevators and two of them are pretty small. So they're a maximum capacity of two people. So we had to look at like, "Okay, well, if you go up to the third floor on this elevator, you're going to come down on this other elevator." And just really create a lot of signage, a lot of communication about that. Two of the big things we did were— we re-engineered the whole entire exit for the museum. Right. Before this moment if you were to come, our front entrance was an entrance and an exit. So we actually now have that only as an entrance and then you now exit through the museum shop which doesn't hurt because then you can maybe spend a little money and then like a lot of museums, you go out through the exit; that was a big investment because we were literally moving doors and walls and- and had to do some construction. The other big thing we did is we thanks in part to— thanks completely— but in part to four different trustees who underwrote the upgrade to our entire age H-VAC air system. Our air handlers always were taking air from the outside and moving it through the inside. So it was never re-circled air. But, we actually upgraded it with UV light technology and also this like oxidation— I was never a chemistry student, so I cannot explain to you every level of detail about it— but it increases the level of oxygen in your air and it helps— it's an active system. So all that air moves through, it's all blasted by the UV light. So it's pretty effective in terms of reduction of lots of things that are actually great. Mold, which is— no museum wants mold. So it's great for allergens. So it's helping, actually, staff who have allergies, which is great. It reduces chemical odors. And now frankly, with the increased cleaning everyone has to do. I have a staff member who's got a high allergy, a high sensitivity to chemical odors, and she's like, "This new system is great. I can breathe so much better on these like intense cleaning evenings." And then it will also reduce bacteria and viruses as well. Nothing's 100% guaranteed, but that investment was a big

one for us to be able to feel like we were creating, for an interior space, better air and better quality.

Grace Woodward 28:44

Yeah, that's excellent to hear. I hadn't— H-VAC makes so much sense— I hadn't really thought about that, but museums, we totally manage our air in such a unique way. And so one of the things I was also wondering about, speaking a little bit to having your visitors back in and things like that. Have you heard from visitors at all about their experience or, and how the community is sort of excited or nervous or whatever about the museum reopening?

Amanda McMullen 29:11

It's, um, so four days in and we are going to survey people who have come through and what's great now with our ticketing system, and also for contact tracing we needed, it's like a restaurant reservation, you needed a point of contact. So that's the other thing, getting people to buy tickets online, we now have that point of contact so we can follow up with everyone and we will on a really simple survey. Before we opened up, we actually did release to our general e-news network, you know, a survey of just what would be your expectations when the museum opens up. So we had about 450 respondents already telling us what they hoped for when we opened up as members and non-members. And that was actually one of the early indications that people would follow the rules because the things that we felt were important with wearing masks, with social distancing, with increased hygiene and hand sanitation stations, that was completely consistent with what the feedback of those 450 people. They all said those were going to be really important to them, well over 70% of people agreement. So we had anticipated that people would be happy with what we were doing. What we will do is follow up with people after each visit. Anecdotally, I was there every single day, Thursday through Sunday, and I did the shift on Saturday and Sunday, which had more people on the weekend, 10:00 to 1:00 right at the front desk. I really wanted to be there, to be on the floor, to hear what were the questions the front desk was asked, what might be the sticking points, and, I mean, I will say people are so grateful that we're open. They are excited. They also love the limited capacity because they feel like they can kind of be in a gallery almost to themselves and I think what was really touching is to hear them be so appreciative to our staff for the measures that we had taken. As far as the community at large, there's a really great arts and culture scene in New Bedford. It's a really creative, highly talented city. And there's a number of peer institutions. And when the pandemic kind of came upon all of us in March, April, I organized some Zoom calls that we sort of would catch up with the leaders of the other organizations. And at one point, it was, sort of— we shifted from “How are we all managing?” To, “Well, how are you going to open? What are you doing? And how are you like, should we think about kind of opening downtown New Bedford?” You know, as much as we could together and so there was, a number of us actually, that opened on July 9, on the same day. There's others like a performing arts theater that they're not gonna be able to open, they can't, they're in phase four anyway with the governor's plan, and it's really complicated to open up a theater at this moment in time, but they will open eventually. So we actually did a whole video that we did together of all of us saying “Welcome back” and sort of little messages about the staggered opening. And I think the organic nature of it has been pretty exciting. I think being able to have— on our opening day we had the Mayor of New Bedford open, invite press in, actually from the plaza of the Whaling Museum. And almost I mean, I couldn't- I could not believe how— we had the space people out because I was like, “You can't all be here in close

proximity!” But it was all the other organizations that were there to support and also to say they're opening as well. So I think this sort of unified opening of downtown was so exciting. So I think there is excitement out there. I think we're all cautiously watching public health officials, government officials, we're all seeing very much what's going on all over the country. And so I think, I think we're sort of prepared for anything. If this pandemic has taught us anything, it's that what you know to be true right now will not be true in six hours. So being able to adapt is really key. Yeah.

Grace Woodward 33:09

Yeah, I think that's almost like the perfect segue into one of the things I've been thinking a lot about is like, are there things that really— I guess, sort of two veins— are the things that like really took you by surprise that you did not expect? And also, are there things that you— what are the things you wish you'd known, like, looking back, you have some hindsight. Are there things that you wish someone had been like, “Oh, this thing might be important, or this thing might be helpful.” It sounds like you guys experienced a lot of success, so that's exciting.

Amanda McMullen 33:39

It is exciting. It's really interesting. I mean, the unexpected for me was the incredible the philanthropy and the outpouring of financial support, which we continue to need and we continue to see. I was struck really early on by donors who said— you know, because I'm thinking it's a pandemic, we're not a health center, we're not feeding the homeless, we're not- not critical, basic needs. And yet, I think because the Museum is so important in the community and so central to the community that immediately it became this Museu-, one board member said “Oh no, this cannot be a question of surviving, we have to thrive.” Like, the museum needs to come out stronger. So I think that was surprising early on and thinking like wow, we're really going to make it and the community's going to help pull us through. You had a second question in there, and I did have an answer. Now I totally forgot it.

Grace Woodward 34:38

No, it's totally good. The kind of like, what is something you wish you'd known or things that you wish you could tell yourself?

Amanda McMullen 34:46

Yeah. So there were like competing thoughts going on. So it's, it's fascinating because I've also been saying to people, it's a public health crisis that's going to become and is an economic crisis. And now, it's a social justice and racial equality crisis. And all three of those are incredibly important and meaningful moments that are going to require change. So for me, what I didn't— I also couldn't have anticipated was this notion of this like domino effect of things to be prepared for. And I think in hindsight, although we have good diversity on our staff, and good diversity on our board, we don't have great, and I think there's, you know, in many ways, lots of museums see, “Well, we've- we've done a really important exhibition focusing on this community X, Y, or Z.” So like, “We've done really good social justice work. We've done really good equity work in racial justice,” and that's not enough and I wish that our strategic plan had thought more about the racial components and this sort of moral crisis. If you could have anticipated it. I'm not sure anyone could have anticipated the what is an invigorating response from the community that I feel will propel everyone forward. So because I don't think our strategic plan was strong enough

on that we're actually reconvening our strategic planning group, our committee is coming back together to say, "There's all these different moments that have taken place, we need it to reflect it, we need to reprioritize things and we have to reflect these last four months more accurately." So I think we'll get it right in the end. But, I don't— I think that was the piece that, out of you know, I mean, the horror of George Floyd's murder has come this other incredibly important moment on the heels of a public health crisis. And it's like wanting to make sure we are doing right to address both of those and trying to navigate that. That was also the sort of like, I didn't see that coming. And yet, frankly, we should all see it coming. Right? We- we certainly know that this country has not resolved slavery and/or racism. So in some regards, it's sort of like, ah, like, of course we— of course, this could surface and it should surface and it's incredibly important for museums, I think to be leaders in the moment.

Grace Woodward 37:23

Yeah, I think that's really well put. I think that's something that's come through in this archive as we work on the museum, as I work in the museum, like especially the service that museums offer to their community and the role they play in their community is so huge, especially it sounds like in New Bedford your museum is so important to the community- a museum really acts as a kind of, not only a support system, but also a— something for people to look up to, something for the community to find solace in. So understanding all those points is so tied to both— all these issues that you mentioned, and that was really well put.

Amanda McMullen 38:00

And then when— just one more then I'll get off my soapbox— but one of the things I've been really cautious of is while we need to do more, we haven't earned the credibility yet to say we're doing all those things. So I think it was really important, and one e—blast that I had sent out and then subsequent other ones and communications with the board is not to present a false like, "Oh, we've done this and the other thing, or we're intending to do this, that, and the other thing" and make a really false, you know, lacking authenticity in a statement. Everyone's intentions are there, I think we all have good intentions, but we have to actually act and do better rather than just saying. So, I think one of the important things is that we actually came right out and said the Museum hasn't done enough. And I thought that that was- I think that was really important for us to do and for the board to be understanding and behind that.

Grace Woodward 38:52

Yeah, that's, I think, again, very well put and really relevant to this moment, and I think noting— I think it's really highlighted this need for reflection and this moment of thinking back and thinking, what did we do? What could we have done better? And so sort of in that I think you've spoken along those lines of something you wish that the museum had been more, more conscious of, or more thoughtful of. Are there any other things that you felt like you wish the museum had been more ready for or more prepared for?

Amanda McMullen 39:26

Yeah, it's so interesting, because w- we had- we had two really monumental things that were going to take place this summer that were really about elevating the Museum at a level of, you know, "More than New Bedford, like, bigger than New Bedford, conquering the world" that kind of thing. And so one was an art exhibition on a very famous painter, who actually was just born

in New Bedford, named Albert Pinkham Ryder who went on to incredible acclaim in his lifetime and was a painter and artist that influenced some of the greats of the great art world, like Jackson Pollock and others. And I mean just like, a really very moody and very cool painter of his time. And because he was born in New Bedford, we sort of say like, “Hey, we get to claim him and celebrate him.” And we do have one Ryder in the, in the Museum. The Smithsonian American Art Museum has an entire Ryder gallery. And by luck, that gallery space was due for renovation and going offline for this summer. And so they were going to loan us all 13 of their Ryder paintings. And we had built a whole exhibit around it. We were getting loans in from the Phillips Collection and the MET and the Brooklyn Museum. I mean, like, incredible institutions. And it was a massive undertaking. We raised a ton of money for it. We had a publication coming out with Rizzoli, like it was just going to be this blockbuster exhibit for us and position the Museum stronger than I think it had been around the art collection that we actually do have. And sort of, you know, the, the Whaling Museum has the whaling story, but it is also the Historical Society, for the city of New Bedford and for the region, really old Dartmouth Historical Society is actually our name on paper, we do business as the New Bedford Whaling Museum, but we are the old Dartmouth Historical Society. And so there's this whole other universe within our collection that we wanted to share. Then we were getting really international attention around this. We had articles that were going to be incredible newspapers in this, that, and the other thing. That whole thing got postponed to next year. What's great is our curatorial team has been able to re-secure every single loan. So the show will go on next year. But it was sort of like, you know, we had this—our eyes on this horizon that was so big. And then the other huge thing is we obviously have a connection with *Moby Dick* and Herman Melville, and we have a 20-year partnership with this group of six scholars on Herman Melville called the- the- the Melville Society. Then we do a live January—20, like 25 hours every January an overnight reading of *Moby Dick*, a live reading, and it's called *Moby Dick* Marathon and it's wildly successful. And they had worked with us to create and we got full funding on a grant for a Melville Teaching Institute where we were going to bring teachers in from all over the world. It was highly competitive. We had over 100 applicants for about 20 spots to come in and learn with the scholars and be able to translate Melville in ways that, like— we had math teachers applying, which you wouldn't think of with Melville to you know, your more typical literature or social studies. So those were going to be two sort of blockbuster things that in our minds, I think we were like “Yes, this is going to elevate us and really put us on this sort of more national or certainly expanded regional map.” But, what has been so surprising and so affirming is that with those things moving to next year, it cleared the path for us to say, “What does the community need?” And all of the sudden, the swirling around community storytelling became such a focal point and we had a project that's been in design and in the works for three years that's called Common Ground. It's an oral history project, not unlike what you're doing, where we're interviewing people and capturing the stories, and particularly in New Bedford, from a lens of race and communities and ethnicities that are not as told, as often. New Bedford's very identified along the lines of the Portuguese community, but less so with African Americans. And yet, Frederick Douglass lived there for seven years. And so, why are we missing that story. Or other stories. There's a huge Jewish population in New Bedford and a number who moved from New York with the textile industry that really created, kind of, corners of Jewish communities, of Italian communities, totally under told stories. So, Common Ground is— all of a sudden— we've like put it on steroids. It has gotten so much attention and so much focus because it's the community telling its own story. And our Curator of Social History is an anthropologist by

training and a professor and so what she has said is, it's sort of this anthropological study where, unlike an exhibit that a curator might know sort of where they want to get to and then they design towards that and they work their research in and they make the connections as they go, Common Ground is actually going to just unfold itself based on the stories and the oral histories and the collection process in terms of creating a community of story tellers. So, I think the unexpected has been, these blockbusters moved to next year. So, they'll still happen which is great, but it really opened up for us to affirm our community role and tell the community story even in a stronger way than I think we had originally planned for and that's a great thing.

Grace Woodward 45:12

Yeah, that's huge. I think speaking to the ways that digital goes it helps do some of those far reaching things that it also reminds you that you can't— focusing on your, like, group and your little community and what stories need to be told there is excellent. And, I think, something I've been seeing in the archive is— there's— people have time to think a little bit more about what their stories are or how they want to tell their stories and— so it's exciting to hear that's been working well for you guys.

Amanda McMullen 45:44

Yeah, I think you're right. People are sort of reflective right now and they're spending a lot of time kind of thinking.

Grace Woodward 45:54

Yeah and I think one thing too is we see a continued importance of museums. People miss museums, which is— as much as it's sad that you have to miss them— I don't know, I felt a kind of like, "People miss us! We mean something to people!"

Amanda McMullen 46:01

Yeah, absolutely, the connection is real. Yeah, yep.

Grace Woodward 46:05

Yeah, and so, I know I don't want to, like, suck up the whole of your afternoon.

Amanda McMullen 46:10

No, it's okay!

Grace Woodward 46:13

So, I thought maybe something we could sort of finish out with is any of the things you feel like— you've talked a little about the future of thinking more about, like, anti-racist work that the museum can do and the kind of community building the museum can do. But, I just was wondering a little bit more what has the pandemic really helped you see as like either potential that you didn't realize the museum had or has it changed directions for things or has it shown you places the museum needs to grow or what this has taught you about the future of the museum?

Amanda McMullen 46:47

Yeah, no, I think, I mean, I think crystallizing the community connection and absolutely an anti-racism standpoint and what— you know, I mean, monuments are the conversation in every city. And so, like, again, for our credibility, the curatorial team, and we're gonna create a complete open, community task force that comes in and helps us reflect on our work and what's on display. And are we telling complete stories? Where have we gotten it right? But, where are we incomplete? And, what more do we need to do? So that's going to be critical work and that will be far more significant in our strategic plan. I think the final aha moment for me is the digital universe and what we need to do to enhance— I mean, we have gone from like zero to 250 miles per hour from where we were but that's sort of saying "We were way behind." I mean, it's great that we've sort of caught up with Museum from Home but we have so much more to do and so much more to anticipate in terms of community need. So I think, truly solidifying and creating a designated department on digital experience that is a partner department and structure to all the other programming and pieces from the curators to public programming to education. It can't exist on, but we've— I mean, our Museum from Home page has become the second highest visited page on our website and it's— so it was funny our May board meeting I shared a stat that for the month of April we would typically have had about 3,400 people walk through our front door. That— April 2019 was, like, 3,403 people and yet since launching Museum from Home at that moment, in about six weeks time we had over 6,000 people on Museum from Home. So it's not only maintaining a connection with people who love museums and were missing it, we were reaching people all over the world. And we were doing different programs where I was getting emails from people from South Africa to Alaska and they were kind of curious about the different pieces of the museum and so it's accelerated our ability to find new audiences which, ultimately, is a growth plan and a pattern for us that we need to pursue. So the whole— the notion of these three elements really reshaping our strategic plan. They're all in our strategic plan so our four big words of our strategic plan are welcome, engage, steward, and thrive and so the digital piece is in there, the anti-racism stuff is in there, we had a whole component of our strategic plan all about accessibility and making a museum for all. But it's not as strong as it needs to be. Right? And so, the notion that these are all important pieces, community is in our strategic plan but I think what is going to happen in the next many months is a re-sifting of those priorities so that those three pieces become even more elevated.

Grace Woodward 50:07

Yeah, excellent, yeah that sounds, I think that it's something to— as we're getting into these, like, months and months of pandemic which, I think, I know for me at least I did not see that coming in the way that it did.

Amanda McMullen 50:21

Yeah, what does it mean for you? With your program and stuff?

Grace Woodward 50:27

Yeah, so, I had just graduated which is great.

Amanda McMullen 50:30

Congratulations.

Grace Woodward 50:30

Yeah, so, it was a weird time to graduate but also it— I am now excited that I don't have to feel, the fall is such a stressful time for students right now, I am lucky to not be a student at this moment. And, searching for a job was not easy I will definitely say. In a museum world it was like, I graduated and the job prospects, which were already feeling limited, I felt like, disappeared. So, that was interesting and so I actually— I started to get involved in the archive because I was interested in doing any kind of historical work I could in some ways, and I worked really closely with a professor of mine, who— she's excellent and it was great to work with her more and we— she ended up being able to get funding through Northeastern. So part of my position now with this is funded which is excellent and, because that wasn't a surety in some ways, funding, you know, everyone is trying to get funding and everyone is trying to get grants. So that's been excellent. And then at the same time I did end up getting a job in Maryland actually which is where I'm originally from, so I'm in Maryland right now.

Amanda McMullen 51:54

Oh, okay cool.

Grace Woodward 51:56

I had thought I'd stay in Boston, but I'm going where the world takes me.

Amanda McMullen 52:00

Good for you, yep, you gotta do it.

Grace Woodward 52:01

Yeah, so I'm working with Maryland Humanities doing like professional development and teacher resources building and some outreach surrounding their History Day competition which is part of the National History Day.

Amanda McMullen 52:14

Yep, that's cool, that's really cool. The museum industry is a challenging time. Yeah, I'm part of a group of about 14 New England different directors of different types of museums from historical museums to art museums, like the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Connecticut and then other science centers like Echo Science Center up in Vermont. It's called the museum directors round table group, we'd literally do a Zoom call every Monday morning at 8 o'clock, just like, "How's your week been? What are you looking forward to?" But, I think the heartbreaking piece has been how much either museums within this roundtable group or just knowing, like, we'd be like "Oh god, Peabody Essex just did a layoff, you know, this one is doing a lay off." And so there are so many talented people in and around the museum universe. I mean, selfishly, from my standpoint I'm like there's really good people like if we can figure out our funding lines can we pick up some of these incredibly talented folks but it's definitely a tough time to be entering the museum industry, let alone sort of being in it. So good for you I'm really glad you landed somewhere.

Grace Woodward 53:25

Thank you. Yeah, it's been— I feel like I totally lucked out because it definitely- it was a weird time and it was a wild time, and it's for people who got, what, like, I'd previously done a lot of work in the Museum of Fine Arts. That's really where I did the bulk of my work throughout

college and throughout my degree, and they— they're whole education department has really been rocked. I worked in their Studio Art Classes program which is all teachers who work on contracts and all of those people who depend on students. You know, they depend on that kind of important interaction. But that is all on, like, major hold.

Amanda McMullen 54:05

And they're- I think other Boston museums are opening up, I think in the next couple of weeks, cautiously. Similar sort of phased plans. But, I don't think the MFA's opening until September, October, I heard.

Grace Woodward 54:18

No, I think they're really holding off, and I think that when Studio Art classes will be a whole other, just because that's where my, like, experience in the museum is, that'll be a whole other process because it's just so much more about students being in classes and students experiencing— providing art supplies and providing art supplies to students who might not have those things at home and just every, just like you were saying, every level, it's all about figuring out what can you do and what can't you do and how can we do the things we can do better.

Amanda McMullen 54:52

Yep, yep, yep.

Grace Woodward 54:54

That's really at the core of it.

Amanda McMullen 54:56

How do you come out stronger from it? Yeah, I mean, I think even, we're finding some redundancy just in the way we do certain things. Just getting to the online ticketing, it was like, that's gonna save you a lot of time, like, people come in and all they're doing is giving you their name. That's an efficiency that we've now created. So some of it is just about doing things differently. Yeah, I think the museum before I got there— the museum was saying, "We should do online ticketing," and then even I've been there for two years and nothing forced us to do it like this moment. So now we're doing it.

Grace Woodward 55:26

Oh yeah, especially thinking of expanding digital resources, that's an easy thing to put off. It's like, "Oh I have to plan this exhibition or I have to do this thing" and now it's like, "No, make sure your online education resources are as strong as they can be." Which is— and it's a good push, that's a positive push I think.

Amanda McMullen 55:44

Yeah, I think that's the weird thing, there's actually some really good, positive things coming out of this moment of people. That as long as you can kind of keep- keep running.

Grace Woodward 55:54

Yeah and I think something that is, at the same time and in the same way that there's been social justice movements in the world, I think that's happening in museums. I think we're seeing a call

for that from folks who have been furloughed or who aren't unionized or all those kinds of pushes are really happening, which is really exciting to see.

Amanda McMullen 56:10

Yeah it is— I mean as a leadership team we're having a lot of equity conversations. It's like we can't, you know, we cannot create an environment where only the college degrees can work from home and everyone else has to, like that's not- that's not internal equity. So we've gotta look at the way even we're working remotely in an equitable fashion. I mean, again, they're good good conversations that people should be having.

Grace Woodward 56:32

Exactly. Yeah, well, I so appreciate you being willing to talk today.

Amanda McMullen 56:37

It's fun. I'm happy to and all of these conversations help me process the last four months just a little bit more, every day, so it's good. Thank you. Glad you're interested in the Whaling Museum and what this moment has meant to us. So thank you for your curiosity.

Grace Woodward 56:52

Yeah, thank you so much. I really am so exciting to learn more about it and I mean, I have to say, I haven't been to the New Bedford, but I've heard a lot about it.

Amanda McMullen 57:02

No worries, no worries, we'll get you in there. Well, good luck with everything and let me know if you have any other questions.

Grace Woodward 57:09

Great, will do! Thank you so much, I really appreciate it.

Amanda McMullen 57:12

Thanks, Grace. Enjoy, take care.

Grace Woodward 57:14

Have a great afternoon, Amanda.

Amanda McMullen 57:16

Thank you, you too.

Grace Woodward 57:17

Bye.