

Q&A

Ellen Stofan

Interviewed by Susan Straight

Ellen Stofan, the former chief scientist of NASA, recently accepted the position of John and Adrienne Mars Director of the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.

You resigned from your position as chief scientist at NASA in 2016. Can you describe what that was like?

You know, it was really sad to leave an agency that I loved so much, but I was the science advisor to the NASA administrator, a political appointee who was leaving at the end of the administration. Charlie Bolden is a huge hero of mine. He was an African American Vietnam War era pilot who flew on the space shuttle and was just an incredible person to work with. He asked that I stay until the end of the administration, and I was happy to because I loved working for him.

What is one of your favorite science centers—besides the Air and Space Museum, of course?

You know, that's such a hard question for me to answer because I really love all types of museums, but obviously especially science centers. But probably my favorite that I've visited most recently is the science center right at the entrance to NASA's Kennedy Space Center down at Cape Canaveral in Florida. I think what I like about it is that it's a storytelling museum. So right when you come in you hear the history of the shuttle, this marvelous story. By the end, I was in tears. There are also lots of fun interactives, such as the simulated vibration of a shuttle take-off and international space station modules that kids can crawl through. Those are the types of things that let us—especially kids—actually physically experience some of the things that we scientists and engineers and technologists get really excited about.

You attended the College of William and Mary, a liberal arts university, as an undergraduate. In what ways did it help you, as a budding scientist, to study in that environment?

I was a huge reader, I loved history, I loved lots of different subjects. At William and Mary, I actually minored in art history. So many scientists I've met throughout my career had minors or double majors in music and science or art and science. That creative side is actually incredibly important to the practice of science. My geology professors were incredibly supportive, knowing my goal of eventually getting a PhD and becoming a planetary geologist. They supported me, challenged me, helped me. You hear so many stories these days of women who faced endless questioning, roadblocks, harassment. I didn't. I received exactly the opposite, and frankly, I don't know if I would have continued if I had encountered those kinds of roadblocks. So I really value the supportive, amazing environment that I found at William and Mary.

What suggestions do you have for science museums to increase STEM accessibility in their communities?

When we look at the fact that science, technology, engineering, math, and computer sciences are still really dominated by men—and not just men, but white men—and you look at the demographics of our population, you see that’s not sustainable. How are we going to get this next generation to be innovators, entrepreneurs, explorers, STEM professionals, and even nonscientists with a profound understanding of science and facts? Museums play such a critical role in attracting and educating kids that we have to make sure they’re telling the stories and holding up role models of all people who’ve been involved in the STEM fields, not just white men: the women of color, men of color, and white women who’ve made incredible contributions all along. I think that’s one of the ways to reach out to all kids and say, “Look, people who look like you have not just contributed, they’ve been fundamental to the success of STEM across the board.”