**Q&A with Nicole Small**

**Interviewed by Susan Straight**

Nicole Small is president of the Lyda Hill Philanthropies, a Dallas-based foundation devoted to advancements in conservation and health. Small is the former chief executive officer of Dallas’ Perot Museum of Nature and Science, where she led the successful merger of the area’s three previous nature and science museums—the Museum of Natural History, The Science Place, and the Children’s Museum—and built the new Perot museum, which opened in late 2012. Her most recent achievement with Lyda Hill is the launch of the IF/THEN initiative, which will empower current STEM innovators to inspire the next generation of pioneers. Specifically, it will provide a robust selection images of women in science for science centers and museums so that visitors’ visual experience will represent greater gender equity.

**Nicole, you are passionate about gender equity in STEM. How will the IF/THEN initiative be a game-changer, especially for science museums?**

First of all, thank you so much for having me today. We are so excited to talk about the launch of IF/THEN and what it’s going to do for the broader community as well as for museums. I am super passionate about the opportunity for everyone to have visibility into science careers. I think almost every problem in this world is going to be solved by science and we need to make sure that everyone has a seat at the table. Over the years, we know that girls have not seen themselves in movies or on walls of museums as often as they should, and we know we’ve got a leaky pipeline as women pursue careers later in their graduate studies. We spent a lot of time thinking about how we might bring a coalition together to begin to think about how to change that. There has been lots of amazing work by women in science and we thought if we brought them all together to make a statement about this, then we might be able to move the needle faster.

IF/THEN is an initiative that’s designed to activate a culture shift among young girls to essentially open their eyes to STEM careers. We’re doing that three ways: first, we’ll continue to fund and elevate women in STEM as role models (we do a lot of funding of women scientists and we’re going to continue to do that); second, we’ll convene partners from entertainment, fashion, sports, business, and academia to illuminate the importance of STEM everywhere and help people understand that it’s all around them; and third, inspiring girls everywhere with better portrayals of women in STEM through media and learning experiences in order to pique their interest in STEM careers.

**You come from a science museum background and have made the transition to private foundation work. Why did you decide to make this shift?**

I had the incredible honor and good fortune to spend about 12 years with what is now the Perot Museum of Nature and Science. I’d had the opportunity to join the science museum team when it was the Museum of Natural History in Dallas and we had 11 staff members and it had been around for decades, but we dreamed of something bigger here in Dallas and had the opportunity to be part of the team that merged three museums, raised $200 million, and built the new Perot Museum of Nature and Science, which has now been open for over five years. It was an incredible opportunity and I learned a lot. One of the things I also recognized was that there was also an opportunity to maybe join the side of funders, where I could, on a bigger platform, join with Lyda Hill, who is the principal of our Lyda Hill Philanthropies, and who has a big vision about changing the world through nature and science and investing in all things related to conservation, science research, science education. I had the opportunity to join her team to help invest on a broader scale and to leverage my museum experience and my business background to help change the world. Our tagline here is “science is the answer.” To be able to be part of that team was an incredible opportunity and I get to still be involved in the museum world, especially with IF/THEN.

**How does your museum experience benefit your current work?**

My experience at the Perot Museum for so many years really deeply has informed this IF/THEN initiative in a variety of ways. First, when you have the privilege of going to work in a science museum every day and riding up and down the elevators with kids all day you really get a unique perspective into how they see the world, what inspires them, what gets them excited, what are those awe-inspiring moments that make them go “aha” and make them think “this is something I should deeply care about” and might want a job with one day. Spending so much time in the museum and seeing how girls and boys experience the programs, both in and outside the museum, really informed how we thought about the IF/THEN initiative and is one of the primary reasons that a huge piece of the IF/THEN initiative is tied directly to allowing museums across the country to have access to the visuals they need to be able to put on their walls to show people who look like everybody who is walking through the museum. Now, everyone who walks through the museum has the opportunity to see someone who looks like them and give them some visibility into what they might be able to be. “If you can’t see it, you can’t be it.” Having worked in a museum for so many years, I know how difficult it can be to obtain the right kind of images we need to put on the walls so visitors can see themselves. Videos, photographs, other means of communication online, virtual reality: for all those kinds of things we are going to be using the IF/THEN initiative to gather what we’re calling a digital asset library, which is going to be made available, for free, to museums across the country so they can access all of the visual aids they need to make sure their walls and their stories equally represent all of the people who walk through their doors. Everyone reading this magazine knows that hundreds of millions of people a year walk through our informal learning institutions, which have such a tremendous influence on the way people see the world. So there’s no better place to tell these stories than at a science museum.

**What’s your next game-changing project?**

It’s hard to say just one. We’re having so much fun at Lyda Hill Philanthropies and the IF/THEN initiative is our big focus at the moment, but we’re also really excited about something we just announced: we are part of the new Lever for Change that the MacArthur Foundation announced just a few weeks ago. If people aren’t familiar with MacArthur’s 100&Change, it would be something that would be wonderful if museums had an opportunity to apply for. They have spun out a new non-profit called Lever for Change, which essentially is competitions and prize money around specific issues. In Texas, Lyda Hill Philanthropies is running the first state-wide Lever for Change competition, launching in early 2020. So that’s our next big thing.

**What can science center professionals at all levels do to make the case for their organizations, given the administration’s proposed fiscal year 2020 budget as well as local financial constraints?**

Having spent ten years trying to raise $200 million to fund and build a brand-new science museum, I am intimately familiar with the challenges that all CEOs and development teams face in trying to make the case that science museums are critical to our communities. We believe that science is the answer and that most of the world’s problems are going to be solved by science. It’s always important to connect everything going on in the world with actionable things that communities can learn from science museums, so we need to prove that it’s good business to invest in our science museums because we’ve got hundreds of millions of people walking through the doors of science museums every year. This is how we’re building our workforce development, this is how we’re building our voting population, this is how we’re building our critical thinkers of tomorrow for the jobs we don’t even know what they are yet. The ROI on that is really great so it’s important to prove that the ROI is really good in these museums. We used to spend a lot of time holding up some amazing Nobel laureates who cite science museums as the reason they got interested in science. When you talk to these amazing Nobel laureates and ask them about their favorite science museum, their eyes light up when they talk about the first time they walked through the heart exhibit at their local science museum or the first time someone visited the Hayden Planetarium and the universe was open to them. So, we know that museums work. We know that they inspire people to pursue careers and to be more educated citizens. If you can make learning fun for kids, it’s something they want to keep doing. That may sound really basic and simple, but if a kid walks through the door of a museum and has a great time, and maybe doesn’t realize they’re learning a whole bunch of things, they’re going to want to go back. And that is more valuable than anything—creating lifelong learners. So the fact that museums are not only meaningful education opportunities but also fun for kids, is, I think, the best sales tool. All you have to do is show a potential donor a kid walking in and seeing their first T-Rex or seeing their first planetarium show and that awe-inspiring moment is worth so many words and hopefully millions of dollars.

**What’s your favorite science center?**

Well, I’m a little bit biased, but of course my most favorite science center in the whole world is, of course, the Perot Museum of Nature and Science in Dallas. There are so many things that are exciting about it: Having the opportunity to build on the legacy of three institutions but also to do a greenfield project where we started completely from scratch; taking the best of those three institutions and yet dreaming of what the next generation science museum could look like; and putting it all into a stunning building that Thom Mayne designed that both attracts and excites people. In the Perot Museum you’ve got 185,000 feet (56,388 meters) of learning experiences, hands-on experiences, and portals to the world beyond Dallas. We cover all sorts of different worlds, from sports to dinosaurs. There’s something there for everybody and something for every age. Every time I walk through the door, I learn something new and I think that’s great fun.

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