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## ***Museum Work in a Time of Pandemic: Crisis and Creativity***

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On March 13, 2020, I was the chief curator and deputy director for curatorial affairs at Telfair Museums in Savannah, Georgia. As did many other administrators of US cultural institutions, we made the difficult decision to indefinitely close the doors to visitors. We worked quickly to implement feasible remote work plans for the administrative team. Our work lives quickly became a series of Zoom meetings during which we rescheduled exhibitions and programs, cancelled events, and often rescheduled again, all while doing our best to continue to deliver on our mission of facilitating inspiring and thought-provoking interactions with art and history for our audiences. We experienced lighthearted moments together, learning whose cat liked to walk across the keyboard, whose home had the best-curated bookshelves, and whose preschoolers were most likely to crash a departmental meeting. (The latter was definitely mine). Yet, we also faced much more serious challenges, as we weathered staff restructuring, supported colleagues experiencing mental health challenges, budgeted and re-budgeted with no firm knowledge of when we might be able to reopen our doors, and grappled with how a museum could best amplify and support the much-needed calls for social justice being heard around our country.

Even as we successfully pivoted our programming to virtual platforms and found ways to work equitably with artists on rescheduling existing commitments, the crises we faced threw into high relief many of the existing tensions and issues that had long simmered just below the surface of our daily activities: the critical need for diverse viewpoints on museum staffs and boards, the absurd expectations that our field (and society in general) places on working parents, and the dangers of focusing too much energy on glittering temporary exhibitions at the expense of engaging authentically with the community that the organization was created to serve.

When a museum is serving its visitors well, it provides them the opportunity to see the world around them in new ways. Although our museum doors were closed, the process of leading a museum through a pandemic gave me a new appreciation for the people with whom I work. I learned that there is no better group of people with whom to face challenges of this magnitude than a team of museum workers. Many of them are artists, historians, or educators, and they bring their unique skills and perspectives to their work. But, no matter their background, they are overwhelmingly resourceful and relentlessly creative, and they approach their work with empathy and passion.

Many of the new approaches to museum work that we adopted during the pandemic can continue to be effective long into the future, even after this crisis is a distant memory.

Virtual programs and panel discussions allow our audiences to interact with artists and thinkers who might never have been able to participate in our programs if they had had to travel to our small city. Community members whose caregiving responsibilities or transportation challenges kept them from museum events in the past were able to participate in our activities. Cries for equity and justice will ring loudly in the ears of museum trustees and senior leadership even after we return to our boardrooms for in-person meetings. Expanded social media presence for our institutions created opportunity for a two-way dialogue with our constituents and forced greater institutional self-awareness when the feedback was not what we wanted to hear. The pandemic forced museums to look critically at themselves, and it is now up to us to continue the important work of expanded outreach, rethinking accessibility, and embracing a more diverse future for our field.