



Holly Hotchner speaks at the Museum's 2020 Women Making History Awards in Los Angeles. Photo by Getty Images for the National Women's History Museum.

AN EXTENDED INTERVIEW with NWHM President and CEO,

Holly Hotchner

Holly Hotchner began serving as president and CEO of the National Women's History Museum in early 2019. In this new extended interview, we talk with Holly about her extensive museum experience, the progress made towards a physical site, and her big plans for the Museum's next chapter.

►► Can you talk about how you became interested in museums?

While studying art history and studio art, I was fortunate to get a summer internship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, working under Director Thomas Hoving. He revolutionized creating audiences for encyclopedic museums that had previously been seen more as passive containers of culture. He staged the first “blockbuster” exhibitions in the U.S., which were very controversial at the time. It was a crash course in new ways of thinking about interpreting history and culture for general audiences, and it ignited my passion to bring visual culture to people.

After working for many years at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Tate Gallery in London, I was fortunate to be appointed as the Museum Director of the New-York Historical Society, one of the oldest museums in the United States. I had five million objects under my care, many of which were in jeopardy and had never even been inventoried. Here, too, audiences had not been developed. We refreshed the staff and Board and broadened the outreach considerably, focusing on bringing history to life and bringing the Society into the 20th century.

My most recent undertaking was transforming the American Craft Museum into a world class institution—the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) in New York. We recreated the former institution, which no longer served a broad audience, and envisioned a new kind of interdisciplinary museum adhering to the values of craftsmanship and creativity across traditional boundaries. In my work there I expanded the collection, the vision, and the infrastructure of the institution. Through new vision and leadership, we led MAD through site and architect selection, created plans and budgets, and grew the Board and staff. We started with a small donor base and public, but in the end raised \$120 million and built a spectacular museum in the epicenter of NYC. The process and goals at NWHM have many similarities.

►► What drew you to taking on the presidency of NWHM?

I was not looking for another full-time building project—certainly not one of the scope and size of NWHM. However, I was astonished to learn that there wasn't *already* one, if not several, museums dedicated to women's history in the U.S. (For that matter, there are also no comprehensive museums dedicated to women's history worldwide). Also, as a female museum director at a time in which I was one of few, advancing the roles of women had been embedded in my career and life. It was overwhelmingly compelling to take on this role and make sure that we, as quickly as possible, secured a site and moved this Museum forward. We were losing the opportunity to interpret and record the important history of women's movements every day. We've learned from the massive support we've received in the past for our virtual programming that there's huge interest in this topic and, for me, it's personal. I'm very interested in creating a community—a place where people can go to contemplate, learn about impressive contributions women have made to our society, and be inspired by a new and expanding narrative. Women and men of all ages, from all walks of life, will finally have a place to visit to learn and be impacted by women's history, and to share and tell their stories.

I see this as an active, interactive, and participatory museum. I've been able to create such environments before, and I can't think of a time where women's history has not been more

discussed in every venue in our lives, whether it's pay equality, ageism, or professions that have been exclusive of women. There are so many issues to explore, and while they're often talked about in print and social media, we need a physical space for this dialogue, too. There is much work to be done uncovering women's history, and we will create a visceral experience to bring stories to life.

Our textbooks don't mention that it was a woman who invented the turn signal on automobiles, a woman who created the technology we use in cell phones today, and a woman who was responsible for the development of COBOL, an early high-level programming language that computers still use today. There are so many hidden stories and achievements to uncover. Our young girls and boys need to experience new and expanded role models. We hope that having a world-class women's history museum will positively impact the futures of many children. I accepted the honor of this position in order to make this happen.

▶▶ **Has the Museum given up its efforts to establish the National Women's History Museum on the National Mall?**

NWHM introduced and lobbied for legislation in Congress to build a National Women's History Museum on the National Mall. Although the Museum came close to getting passage in both houses, Congress mandated that it had to pass by unanimous consent. We then spearheaded and funded a bill to establish a commission to determine the viability and support for a museum on the Mall. The report confirmed what NWHM had been telling Congress all along: the American people want this Museum.

Even after this report was presented, NWHM would still have to continue introducing bills to Congress to secure a site on the Mall. NWHM has *not* given up on working to one day build a Museum on the Mall; however, the uncertainty of any timeline or funding for a government-supported Museum on the Mall led the Museum's Board of Directors to the conclusion that we would seek private funding. We are in the process of creating a plan for a Museum that can be in operation within the next few years. We are already a recognized Museum; now it's time to have a physical presence! We have heard from our constituents that there is an urgency to expand our programs and create a community *now*.

NWHM will expand on the enthusiasm and support we've already built for the establishment of a physical National Women's History Museum. We are working on our opening exhibition to debut in D.C. and travel to selected venues across the country. The concept is to build knowledge about women's history as the show travels. Each venue will add a section about revealing local women who have been impactful throughout history. Through the exhibitions and associated programs, we hope to create a national women's history movement to help retrieve women's contributions and stories from their local communities.

The Museum is currently looking at several sites in D.C. The pandemic has changed the world and the new normal for everyone; our goal remains to find a space that has proximity to modes of transportation, is immediately available, and is affordable. After an extensive search, we identified three potential sites in Washington, D.C., and our discussions with Union Station continue. We are currently working with a renowned architectural firm, engineers, retail and restaurant consultants, and technology and interactive experts to assess the feasibility of each site. The Museum Board and consultants are hard at work exploring all of our options.

▶▶ **The Museum has made a conscious choice to hire women-owned companies and women scholars to work on its vision, content, building, etc. Can you talk about why this was important to you?**

So many professions—including architecture, construction, engineering, and technology—are male-dominated. In line with our mission, we felt it was incumbent upon us to hire women- and female-owned firms. For example, our retail store is being developed by Lakeside Collaborative, a remarkable mother/daughter team with a distinguished history of mission-driven retail. We are committed to exclusively showcasing and celebrating the work of women in the store. Similarly, our restaurant and bar will showcase female chefs and mixologists. So, all of our services, exhibitions, programs, retail, and food and drink will be a seamless idea linked by female creativity. I

like the idea that the Museum will not only offer a place to learn women's history, but also be *the* place to get the best food and shopping experience in town. We'll create community not only through sharing recipes of the food in our restaurant, but also through creating special events where we feature different female chefs from various regions of the world.

▶▶ **What is the Museum working on while you're in negotiations for the site?**

We've had an extraordinary number of very successful ongoing public programs that we are in the process of expanding. In fact, NWHM has had a large audience in the virtual education space for many years now. The pandemic has created the need for increased in-home programming, so we have doubled our programs for teachers, students, young learners, and general audiences; in fact, we've already had more than two million visitors to our website since the beginning of this year alone. Thanks to the tremendous financial support from our Museum's Charter Members, we have expanded our efforts tremendously in response to the volume of requests received. We're also incredibly proud to have recently launched NWHM@Home, our new daily content for at-home learning and educating.

In addition, NWHM has been hard at work with our traveling centennial lecture series, "Determined to Rise", and up until the pandemic, we held lectures and discussions in nine cities across the nation. But because of COVID-19, like other organizations, we have quickly regrouped to reschedule some events for the fall and present others virtually. We're also moving full steam ahead with planning for a virtual event this fall.

Our most recent public event, which happened right before the quarantine, was our sold-out Women Making History Awards in Los Angeles, where we honored four remarkable, trailblazing women: actresses and advocates Andie MacDowell and Logan Browning; Kelly Vlahakis-Hanks, president and CEO of ECOS*, and Women Connect4Good, Inc. Founder Dr. Nancy D. O'Reilly.

NWHM was also in the last stages of collaborating on a celebration at the Kennedy Center to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment, which has now been rescheduled for the spring of 2021. In addition, detailed exhibition planning for 2021 is well underway.

I would invite anyone who hasn't visited our website, www.womenshistory.org, to do so right away. There are many student and educator resources, such as lesson plans and fun projects for parents to do with children that relate to women's history. We have downloadable eBooks on the women's civil rights movement, Women in War, and much, much more. While the leadership of the Museum continues to research our future space, our staff continues to do what we do best: sharing women's history with learners of all ages around the world with our vast educational programs.

▶▶ **Does the Museum accept endowment and planned giving gifts to ensure it will have the funds to maintain the building once the capital campaign raises the money needed for renovations and/or the first year's operating expenses?**

Endowment and legacy gifts are possibly the most important gifts that the Museum can receive because they will ensure that it will continue into perpetuity. In fact, it was an early bequest from a teacher for \$250,000 many years ago that enabled the Museum to catapult to the next step in its evolution. We only wish she were alive today to see how much this generous donation helped grow the organization. And now that we are in negotiations for a permanent home, planned giving donations and major gifts are critical to helping us realize our dream.

▶▶ **What are you planning in 2020?**

In collaboration with the National Endowment for the Humanities, we are planning a greatly expanded series of national programs. This will include podcasts, filming of events, publications, teacher training programs, and, importantly, exhibitions. We aspire to be at the forefront of presenting women's history in many formats.

►► Once your site has been identified, how quickly can the Museum expect to open?

We already have detailed plans for programming that conceivably, within 18 months or so of signing a contract, we could be ready to open. Much of the timing will be dependent upon raising the funds needed. Our plans are already well underway.

►► Are there naming rights if a philanthropic donor or organization steps forward with a large lead gift now?

Yes, of course! There are many ways in which donors can be recognized, and there are a variety of ways to help NWHM move forward.

►► Is the Museum collecting artifacts at this time?

While the Museum already has a small collection, we are not making a commitment to collect artifacts today. Housing and caring for objects are long-term and costly undertakings. Most museums, libraries, historic homes, and historical societies display a very small percentage of what they own, and there are so many collections that have never seen the light of day. My hope is that we can partner with existing collections to help with the interpretation and exhibition of their works and give visibility to their institutions.

That being said, we will look at donations on a case-by-case basis. If we feel we can utilize objects in exhibitions and learning through study collections, we may go that route.

►► What impact do you think the Museum will have in D.C. and in the museum world?

My hope is that the Museum will attract tourists, scholars, academics, and audiences of all kinds, and that they will visit us time and time again. This space is imagined as a very dynamic, interactive, and collaborative museum that is a bit of a different model than many others. I hope that our travelling shows will encourage discovery of local history and create lasting impact in those communities. This Museum will have continual programs and forums for interaction—a place where stories can be told and histories can be recorded. I hope this will incentivize cities across the country and around the world to create their own women's history centers and that we serve as a model.

►► You've been with the Museum a year now. What are your observations?

I'm so glad you asked me this. The 55,000+ members of this Museum are simply amazing! They are fiercely committed and very energetic, and many of them are focused on seeing this Museum get built. They've been with us for a long, long time, which is unusual for a museum with no physical presence. The Museum's Charter Members, with our leadership, have kept this dream and Museum alive. They are partly responsible, along with dedicated corporate and individual sponsors, for underwriting our massive educational website, which had over four million hits last year alone. I cannot say enough how important our Charter Members' continued help is to our success. And we will remember all who are there for us—all donations will help to build our museum. Hopefully we will be a model for how building a community can accomplish so much.

►► Finally, who are the women who inspire you?

The women who inspire me most are the unknown heroes—women whose stories have not yet been uncovered, who operate under extreme pressures of every kind, from being the primary breadwinners and caretakers of their children, to religious exclusions and the challenges of simply putting food on the table. I'm inspired by these women and what they do to keep optimism in their lives and their family's lives. Many families end up being relatively matriarchal, and women are expected to have 10 or 20 jobs, so to speak. I think these women are our heroes! Even though the Museum we build won't be able to hold *all* of their stories, we *will* shine a light on as many women as we can. I can't wait! ●