

Leadership Profile of Weaving the Fabric of Community: Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial Executive Director Elizabeth Grimaldi

Caitlin Palmer 20 January 2020



Photo Credit: Mark Garvin

Elizabeth Grimaldi has long believed that art feeds a spiritual need. Serving as Executive Director of the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial since 2013, Grimaldi has built her reputation on innovation, experimentation, and creativity in developing inclusive arts programming, nurturing community networks, and attracting institutional supporters. A recognizable leader in Philadelphia's cultural nonprofits for over a decade, she demonstrates a clear commitment to strengthening her local creative community through accessible arts education.

Always passionate in the arts, Grimaldi moved from Hong Kong to the Greater Philadelphia area in 1999 to attend Bryn Mawr College and pursue her interest in painting. Shortly after receiving a B.A. in Fine Arts in 2003,ⁱ she was drawn to South Philadelphia by its vibrant community and pride in its artistic and cultural heritage. Now a long-term resident of Queen Village and a neighbor to many in the community she works so diligently to serve, she is uniquely positioned to both understand and meet their needs.ⁱⁱ

In 2009, Grimaldi became the Executive Director for the Village of Arts & Humanities, a Germantown-based organization committed to artist-facilitated community building in North Philadelphia. With a mission to “support the voices and aspirations of the community through providing opportunities for self-expression rooted in art and culture,”ⁱⁱⁱ she found herself at the head of both an organization and a community hit hard by economic recession. Even in the face of obstacles like a neglected and crumbling neighborhood, dwindling funding, and staffing and budget cuts,^{iv} Grimaldi was able to effect real growth for the organization. During her four-year tenure as Director, the Village reaped the benefits of the development of a master campus plan for its ten buildings and fifteen art parks,^v a Philadelphia Impact100 grant in 2012,^{vi} and Knight Arts Challenge grants in 2012^{vii} and 2013.^{viii} Grimaldi also benefitted from these successes, honing her skills in mobilizing resources and relationships

on the organizational, local, and national levels.

Grimaldi relies heavily on this experience in her current role as Executive Director of the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial. Fleisher, as it is known to its community, has offered affordable and tuition-free arts education and programming in one form or another in Southeast Philadelphia for over one hundred and twenty years. Serving more than 20,000 people annually, the organization is deeply committed to "making art accessible to everyone, regardless of economic means, background, or artistic experience."^{ix} After assuming her role, Grimaldi quickly identified restructuring opportunities to allow the organization to better serve its mission and community. Working closely with the Programs Director, she reinvigorated off-site programming by restructuring the department and staff to increase capacity with more schools and more opportunities. She later established an Operations Department to oversee the general administration and day-to-day operations of these increased program services, freeing the Programs Department to "think big" about new and innovative possibilities. Reflecting on these changes, Grimaldi noted that they yielded positive results because the organization was able to "learn something about itself."

Perhaps her most exciting project for Fleisher, she is currently developing a campus plan based on an audit of physical space. Nonprofits will frequently evaluate if every dollar is working for the mission, but Grimaldi has a

different question for her organization: is every *square foot* working? To this end, the plan seeks to co-develop a half-acre parking lot owned by the Samuel S. Fleisher Trust in order to turn underutilized space into a source of income to support the mission.^x The goal is to solve what she sees as a spatial dilemma. The Trust includes the buildings and land within the estate, but Fleisher endowed the *concept* of community enrichment through the arts. As the demographics of the neighborhood rapidly change, Fleisher must reach out farther and farther to meet the needs of their target audience. Grimaldi believes this development plan is a step towards making the organization financially sustainable so that revenues can be diverted to the areas where Fleisher's programming is meeting the most need. This demonstrates Grimaldi's strengths as a leader: not only is she able to ask the right questions, but she can also effectively implement creative solutions.

This culture of reflection and experimentation extends into Fleisher's relationships with its community partners. These partnerships empower community-directed programming and make great progress towards building familiarity and engagement with the organization. However, Grimaldi is particularly cognizant of the sensitivity of doing due diligence before testing new structures or services with the public. She emphasizes the importance of allowing for built-in time to hear the needs of and evaluate the impact on the populations that new

services might affect. Grimaldi acknowledges that the biggest mistakes both she and the organization make are “top-down” changes put in place too quickly. But missteps are part of the institutional learning process and have not deterred Grimaldi from pursuing inclusive, innovative programming in the arts – and her community is answering the call. “Bring Your Own Project,” a new program series that received major support from the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, has already established partnerships with Women Organized Against Rape (WOAR) and VietLead.^{xi} A logical step for the organization is into advocacy, where Grimaldi could use her intuitive leadership and Fleisher’s resources to continue their community work at the policy level.

Promoting this “programs-first” mentality, Grimaldi encourages inter-departmental problem solving among Fleisher’s staff and board. Staff are reminded to focus not on their individual roles or departments, but on what they want to accomplish for the organization as a whole. Similarly, the Board has strong representation from the student and faculty populations – many board members are also Fleisher students – and are big-picture oriented in their priorities. Grimaldi is a talented situational leader, and her office works more to coordinate and support her staff and board than to directly manage them. This is because Grimaldi does the work up-front – establishing engagement and support at every level of community, organization, and leadership, then letting her team get to

work.

Under Elizabeth Grimaldi's leadership, the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial has amplified its commitment to Southeast Philadelphia's creative cultural future. From the neighborhoods, to Fleisher's students, to within the organization itself, all are united around the importance of making art accessible to the community members that are hardest to reach. "Fleisher's mission is really more about community building than the visual arts: teaching art is the process through which we provide a space where people have access to art but also to each other," she smiles. "We are the fabric of the community."^{xii}

Author bio

Caitlin Palmer is the Curatorial Administrative Coordinator for the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) at the University of Pennsylvania, where she works closely with the curatorial team to fully support and facilitate the exhibition and publication program. Before joining ICA as Office Coordinator in 2017, she served as Gallery Manager of Savery Gallery and held internship positions at ICA and Second State Press. Also, an artist, Palmer's work has been shown at Zilkha Gallery in Middletown, CT, and at Little Berlin and Tiger Strikes Asteroid, both in Philadelphia, and is in the permanent collection of Wesleyan University. Palmer graduated from Wesleyan University in 2013 with high honors for her printmaking thesis *temporal states*, a BA in the Science and Society

program, and a minor in International Relations. She is currently completing her M.S. in Non Profit Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania.

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