

Lisa Nelson-Haynes

Michelle Johnson 26 March 2019

Since April 2016, Lisa Nelson-Haynes has served as Executive Director of Philadelphia Young Playwrights (PYP). Considering that PYP is an organization that bases its mission around the power of storytelling, it is clear why Lisa Nelson-Haynes was chosen to lead it. As an accomplished storytelling artist herself, Lisa fluidly expresses her investment in Philadelphia's youth and the power that PYP has to elevate their voices.

Philadelphia Young Playwrights is a nonprofit organization dedicated to Philadelphia's youth and the beliefs that young people have important stories to tell, deserve a platform to tell them, and that theater provides the necessary tools to showcase these stories. Since 1987, PYP has served nearly 60,000 Philadelphia-area students and teachers as well as partnered with more than 60 professional playwrights and theater companies to enrich their participants' experiences.

After more than 25 years, PYP works with more than 90 public and private K-12 classrooms in the Greater Philadelphia area in playwriting workshops led by local theater artists. They also expanded their impact beyond improving literacy and critical thinking skills to enhancing students' sense of agency, responsibility, and self-esteem by producing more than 60 public presentations of

original student work.

Lisa Nelson-Haynes graduated from Hampton University and is a current MFA candidate for film-making at Temple University. For 15 years prior to her position at Philadelphia Young Playwrights, Lisa has been the Associate Director at the Painted Bridge Art Center and has been nationally recognized as an expert in digital storytelling through her work at Storycenter in Philadelphia. Lisa has an in-depth knowledge of the Philadelphia arts community as Associate Director as well as an artist herself.

Her deep personal and professional ties to the Philadelphia arts community are crucial to her success as Executive Director of Philadelphia Young Playwrights as the organization is uniquely formed around the Philadelphia area and its people. As a storyteller herself, Lisa understands first-hand the power telling your own stories can have for personal development as well as the obstacles and self-doubt that PYP participants may be feeling.

Her growth from an Associate Director at the Painted Bridge Arts center to Executive Director at PYP was aided by her experience at the Nonprofit Executive Leadership Institute at Bryn Mawr College School of Social Work and Social Research. There, she spent significant time reflecting on her personal style of interacting with people. The product of that experience, as well as what likely is

the impact of her work as a storytelling artist, is a person who demonstrates immense clarity of thought and self-awareness.

The openness and small size of the PYP offices lends itself to how Lisa approaches her management duties. Although the previous Executive Director was more directive, establishing a culture of handing down orders, Lisa works collaboratively, believing in the skills and insight of those she works with to meet them where they are. Her balance between confidence and humility is apparent in how she both believes in her personal vision for the organization while trusting in the expertise of others who have had more direct experience with playwriting. Although transitioning to a new leadership role can be difficult, Lisa has worked through the process with transparent intentions and an open mind to the contributions of others.

In this recent transition of leadership, Lisa also closely interacted with a board that had been incredibly involved in supporting an executive director who was not on-site during its previous year. Although working with an unusually dedicated and knowledgeable board during the first year of her executive directorship was beneficial, the transition to establish her own assertions as executive director has led to a new vision for PYP's core curriculum.

As a mother of two adolescent children, Lisa's understanding and commitment to youth development is

both deeply personal and perceptive. As the leader of a program that serves a population of mostly African-American adolescent students, Lisa has demonstrated her sensitivity to the issues facing young people of color at this moment in history, particularly in Philadelphia. In her observations of how many participants of color are writing dark, trauma-centered pieces, Lisa wants to revisit how PYP's approach best serves those students who might need the program the most. Lisa proposed to and is backed by the board in implementing a curriculum shift from trauma-informed practices to making PYP a healing center. This stems from her belief that while adults have coping skills for the dark times we are in culturally, there are very few resources for young people to learn those coping skills, and Lisa would like PYP to be one of those resources.

Lisa Nelson-Haynes demonstrates many of the qualities of a Level 5 Leader. Early on in her position as executive director, she demonstrated her ability to confront brutal facts as she had to make the decision to let go of an employee who was a close friend and champion of hers during the hiring process. However, her commitment to the hedgehog concept of the organization made her realize that his position was not necessary to PYP's success, and therefore that employee had to be let go. Her blend of humility and confidence in her management style also make her an effective leader in inspiring commitment to PYP's mission. In her work to improve

social impact through her shift of the organization's curriculum as well as increased earned revenue streams, she shows that she is indeed a plow-horse for her organization. In addition to newly earned revenue streams, her tangible contributions extend to the application of her digital storytelling expertise, through her creation of a PYP podcast and television programming first launched in October 2018. Her work ethic is strengthened by how intensely the passion for the mission drives her: her motivation and joy in the work comes from engaging in the organization's mission at multiple levels -- going to classrooms and seeing the students' engagement, watching the teaching artists dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to the students' needs, and watching the impact of their performances on community members and board members alike.

Lisa Nelson-Haynes is an executive director who exemplifies the strong relationship between nonprofit leader and an organization's mission. She leads successfully because she opens herself up to be inspired by the people she works with and the students she serves.