

Leadership Profile: Maya Enista Smith, Executive Director of the Born This Way Foundation

Janine Hope 24 April 2017

The Born This Way Foundation (BTWF) was founded in 2011 by American singer/songwriter Stefani Germanotta, also known as Lady Gaga, and her mother, Cynthia Germanotta. The BTWF was created to support the wellness of young people and to foster a more accepting society by empowering youth. They accomplish this mission through in-school initiatives, national partnerships with youth centric organizations, and conducting ongoing research to capture stories of young people world wide.

Executive Director Maya Enista Smith is based out of the BTWF headquarters in Los Angeles, California. In their small upper management team of five, Maya started as the Director of Impact and Operations in 2012 and was promoted into the Executive Director position when the Foundation started growing. Travelling between three national offices, Maya plans and runs project initiatives, controls the Foundation's finances, and manages operational staff and volunteer network.

Maya started her professional career in civic engagement

after graduating from Rutgers University in 2004 with a degree in Political Science and Urban Studies. After three years of working with Rock the Vote and the Hip Hop Civic Engagement Project, she discovered her passion for youth-based community development initiatives. In 2005, she translated her passion into program management as the Chief Executive Officer of Mobilize.org, a national millennial-led program organization that invests in youth generated solutions to youth related problems. After seven years, Maya left Mobilize.org to direct the operations department of the Born This Way Foundation, at the time a new project committed to fostering a more inclusive, safe environment for young people across the world.

Leadership Style

Although Maya self identifies as a "tough" leader, believing in firm but fair leadership practices, I spoke with her immediate staff and each member of her team called her a transformational leader. Operations Assistant Samantha Hanson said she considers Maya a "professional hand holder," or the uber compassionate "heart of the team." She intimately knows each staff member and volunteer, and knows when and how to uniquely challenge each to grow within the organization. She keeps a very open line of communication with all staff, holds weekly calls to touch base and always starts the conversation with "So, how are things going in your

world?" This allows her to adapt a project's goals to each member's capabilities and personal goals.

Personal and Organizational Vision

Harkening back to her professional start, Maya has always firmly believed in the empowerment of youth. She believes that the power behind real community change should be given to and harnessed by the young people and the only way to achieve that is by educating and involving all age groups in discussions about current social issues. Her personal vision is to become a model of kindness and bravery in her approach to educate others about the importance in creating safer, happier spaces. For BTWF, Maya similarly envisions growing its influence and outreach through more focused research, youth led in- school initiatives, and partnering with more organizations to create more models of kind, brave leadership. Professionally and personally, she works to create more opportunities for young people to "have a seat at the table" for conversations that affect the world they live in.

Most Important Contribution

Maya describes herself as someone who wants "absolutely everything on the plate," meaning she wants to try every new initiative, partner with every willing organization, and cultivate every new connection. Through this process, she is most proud of elevating the

Born This Way Foundation's Hack Harassment program, an anti cyber bullying campaign, by partnering with Intel and Vox Media. By expanding their network of partnerships, she was able to make the program self-sustainable by engaging college students as Hack Harassment Campus Ambassadors. She is most proud of this initiative because it allows the program to be run by those who are affected most by cyber bullying.

Mentorship

Maya sites several industry influencers who she looks up to in terms of program development and management, but her most valued mentor would be Cynthia Germanotta, the BTWF's cofounder. According to Maya, Cynthia is most successful as a leader because she cares so much about every single person working within the organization. She stands for the youth they work for, and for the staff who work to benefit the youth. An example of this mentorship in action was cited in a post-election phone call with all members of the BTWF staff. While Maya wanted to immediately set up the week's agenda and move forward with current initiatives, Cynthia stepped in, paused the conversation, and simply asked how everyone was feeling. Although the Born This Way Foundation is unaffiliated, she knew that tensions were high and some staff members felt very emotional about the election results. After a facilitated conversation about the overall vibe of the team, Cynthia redirected the

conversation and encouraged her staff to use that emotion as a foundation for more youth centric work. Maya believes this intuitive step of first checking in was integral in her team's success that week and looks up to Cynthia for modelling such compassionate and understanding leadership.