

# Leadership Profile: Heidi Warren of Starfinder

Alexandra Seits 11 July 2017

Heidi Warren is the executive director of Starfinder and continues to be the driving force since she first joined in 2004, shortly after it was founded in 2002. Heidi first served as Starfinder's chief operating officer and then as the deputy director. She was well suited and prepared for those roles after having been the managing director at The Village of Arts and Humanities in North Philadelphia, an organization similar to Starfinder in its focus on working with youth. As the managing director of The Village of Arts and Humanities, Heidi learned by doing. Later, at Starfinder, she served as deputy director, employing over twenty years of experience in nonprofit leading and managing.

Before Starfinder, in her ten-year role at the Village of the Arts and Humanities, Heidi enabled the founder, Lily Yei, to develop the young organization into an example of an internationally known model on constructing community through art. She has also worked as an independent consultant to help educational services, nonprofit arts, and social service organizations in the Philadelphia area strengthen and execute their missions. She used what she learned to implement her lessons into her work with other organizations so they could avoid the challenges she

encountered over her career. Heidi has helped these organizations home in on their focus, crystalize their visions, and promote integral action. Heidi graduated from Haverford College with a Bachelor of Arts in Growth and Structure of Cities (urban studies) and a Certificate in Executive Leadership from Bryn Mawr's Nonprofit Executive Leadership Institute.

Heidi got into nonprofit work because she fell in love with the mission and philosophy of the Village of the Arts and Humanities after she examined the organization for her senior thesis at Haverford. She then realized that her papers could be used for grant proposals. She stayed with nonprofit work as she came to realize that art or playing a sport can transform individuals who are often distracted by the challenges of being a low-income person living in the inner city and enable them to see a bigger picture and achieve greater success in their life.

After being a seasoned manager and CEO at the Village of the Arts and Humanities, Starfinder chose Heidi; it was not the other way around. She met with Tony, the founder of Starfinder, who was an amazing visionary; however, a lot of the infrastructure at the organization was not yet in place. Heidi's role then became to attend to systems, detail, structure, and human resources. Her role continued to expand at Starfinder, and when she decided to leave after ten years, she gave one year's notice because they needed to find someone who could do all the things she was attending to. Through this transition, Heidi began

consulting part-time. She resigned from Starfinder, but did the books and stayed on in a technical role. Heidi believes that if a nonprofit is functioning well, they are focusing on their mission which means the mundane and technical stuff needs to be taken care of and not remain a distraction.

Heidi stayed connected to the mission of Starfinder and despite mission drift in the past, so does the board. After Heidi left, she was asked back and discovered again the underlying mission and potential that could be rebuilt. Together, with Steve Bauman, they rewrote the mission and vision statements to act on their highest and best purpose. They reignited the belief that every child has a star in them and they were able to reevaluate any reputation and find hidden gems, although being a magnet for talent was not their goal at all. In 2013, Steve stepped down and joined the board and Heidi became the executive director. Heidi committed herself to making Starfinder financially stable as she realized you cannot plan on grant income and board support alone. She has also made sure that Starfinder focuses on the daily issues that their children, teens, and students face such as food insecurity and homelessness. Heidi's approach is holistic and practical, so Starfinder can carry out its overall mission and cultivate a healthy and beneficial environment for children and teens to grow and learn.

As a leader, Heidi's first priorities are financial and the facilities. Meanwhile, her role was so wide-spreading that

she also had to take on the roles of three other positions which entailed fundraising and external facing work. Of the three modes of equal governance discussed in Governance as Leadership, Heidi embodies the fiduciary mode, strategic mode, and the generative mode as well (First Principles). Heidi took on these executive roles while being pregnant with her second child and in March, she became Executive Director and essentially three other roles, and began her maternity leave in October.

In many ways, Heidi is an asset and brings a different perspective to her work since as she says she is not, "of the soccer world" and her experience has mainly been in the nonprofit sector which makes it is easier for her to wear the fiscal hat to support Starfinder. Because she did not have the initial conflict of interest of many people being friends there is less discomfort for her to ask for money and she has had more success. As the executive director, she has reevaluated a lot of what Starfinder stands for to make sure its message and image are clear, coherent, and simple. For instance, she clarifies that Starfinder believes that there is a star in every child, it is not about finding or poaching star athletes at all; it is rather about helping children and teens uncover and illuminate the star inside them. Heidi is extremely enthusiastic about Starfinder and comfortable with the energy of the organization. Yet, she has found it difficult after being in the number two role, to delegate the vital spreadsheets and details although she often thrives

driving the practical order of business. She has made it a priority and goal to get to the important stuff and not just focus on the urgent things, but she will always have the disposition to focus on logistical communications and financials. Ultimately, her goal is to continue to think bigger than those logistics, though.

Heidi is inspired by the founder of the original nonprofit she worked for, the Village of the Arts and Humanities' Lily Yei. Heidi notes that she is always joyful, brings to her work a sense of play, positive energy, and a warm heart. Steve, another former executive of Starfinder, also inspired Heidi as he embodied a healthy work and life balance which is a culture Heidi wants for Starfinder. Heidi believes in fanning the flames so that the magic happens and builds up Starfinder -- because "this" -- she says as she points out onto the turf and classrooms where the children and teens are currently playing and learning, "is important."

## **Works Cited**

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