

# The Best Job in the City: Trish Wellenbach and the Revamped Please Touch Museum

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After Philadelphia's Please Touch Museum, a premier children's museum focused on learning through play, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in September 2015 and its CEO, Lynn McMaster announced that she was stepping down, it became quite clear to the board of directors that new leadership and a new plan was necessary. Familiar with her work from a previous strategic planning and consulting stint, the museum's search committee approached Trish Wellenbach, a well-known consultant and leader with prior experience working with distressed organizations.

Initially Trish was hired by Please Touch as a consultant, with the intention of ultimately bringing her on as permanent CEO; a move which was made official in April 2016. Tasked with restructuring and revitalizing staff, as well as financially stabilizing the organization, Trish raised eight million dollars in just 12 short weeks. "The bigger the challenge, the more I enjoy it," says, Trish, and the Please Touch Museum undertaking was just that.

Trish believes that she should never be the smartest person in the room and thus hires and surrounds herself with experts in their fields. Faced with a skeletal staff and a CFO who recently quit when she joined Please Touch, Trish hired the head of IT and a CFO whom she had worked with previously and slowly rebuilt the leadership team with people whom she trusts to drive the organization's mission forward. Half of those she hired in the first four months of her tenure are no longer with the museum due to her brutal honesty about the new direction of the organization and her strong belief in having the right team in place. Trish also expanded the board of directors from six to 16 people, growing the range of expertise and diversity.

Prior to joining Please Touch, Trish ran an executive management consulting firm, advised the Philadelphia Orchestra for 18 months on a stronger business plan, and was CEO of Green Tree School & Services, an agency serving children and young adults on the autism spectrum. At Green Tree, Trish spent two years stabilizing the organization and avoided filing for bankruptcy. Before stepping down, she aided in Green Tree's restructuring which included placing 280 children with other agencies, laying off one hundred employees, and meeting with each employee individually.

Immediately upon taking the helm at Please Touch, Trish recognized that similar to the Orchestra and Green Tree, the organization not only required strong fundraising, "the

easy part is the money," she says, but a complete restructuring and new business model. She explains that the previous model was flawed and is what ultimately resulted in the debt and bankruptcy. In her first two weeks with Please Touch, Trish changed everything. She developed a five-year strategic plan, "Please Touch Museum 2020: Reimagining Play to Empower 21st Century Learners," which reenvisioned the organization's mission and promise to the Philadelphia community, created a lean business plan with a dashboard and bolted-financials to distribute to funders, a blueprint of what the new organizational structure would look like and board, program, and leadership diversification.

Trish's strategic plan highlights the idea that due to societal and technological changes, as well as a movement towards nontraditional learning, there has been a redefinition of when, how, and where learning takes place. Please Touch has embraced this, recognizing that moving forward learning will be more self-directed, experiential, and social, nurturing skills to aid in children's social-emotional development (Wellenbach & Traynor).

A nurse in a past-life, Trish's interest in Please Touch was born from a passion for fixing our education system. She believes that education is what prepares us all to become a valuable member of family and community; "it is important to invest at a young age to give one skills for a lifetime" she explains. Please Touch's innovative method of learning through interaction and play is something that

Trish feels is powerful and sets the museum apart from others of its kind, though she frequently visits other sites to gain inspiration and knowledge of what they could and should be doing better. "You don't get stuff done without doing stuff stupidly," she states.

A self-described "tough but fair" leader, Trish is intimidating, but treats her staff well and acknowledges that "if I don't have a nickname, I haven't worked hard enough." Trish sees herself as a problem solver, an asker of provocative questions, and has tolerance for failure, but no tolerance for not learning. Despite her hard exterior, Trish's compassion and soft-side for her employees, the communities Please Touch serves, and her family runs deep. A few weeks after she officially became CEO, the museum's annual Storybook Ball was held, and Trish stood at the entrance, dressed as a princess with a wand, greeting every family that came through the doors.

Trish prides herself on the inclusivity of the museum, as well. She claims that the population that visits is the most diverse, both socioeconomically and culturally, in all of Philadelphia. Since joining Please Touch, the exhibit which Trish seems most excited about will be arriving in February 2019 thanks to a \$300,000 grant from PEW Charitable Trusts. "America to Zanzibar," initiated at the Children's Museum of Manhattan, will be an interactive way for children to learn about the experience of being Muslim in America based off of actual demographics from the Philadelphia area and research on children and

empathy.

Though Trish acknowledges that she and the organization still have a long road ahead, "it takes half as long to get out as it took to get in," she explains, they have already come a long way in reversing an almost detrimental circumstance as a result of a tremendous passion for the museum, its legacy, and providing impactful education to children.

Trish boasts, "I have the best job in the city." As a soon to be grandmother, nothing pleases her more than the idea of her grandchild on the playground bragging to their friends saying, "my grandma's job has a carousel!" And just like that, Trish's playful side comes out too.

A special thanks to Trish Wallenbach for her participation in the writing of this article.

## **Works Cited**

Wellenbach, Patricia D., and Kristen Vieira Traynor. "Please Touch Museum 2020: Reimagining Play for 21st Century Learners." *Issuu*, 25 Jan. 2017.