



Holland Museum's D.E.A.I. Journey

By Ricki Levine | Executive Director, Holland Museum

In early 2017, when I was interviewing for the position of Executive Director with the Holland Museum, I made a point to visit the galleries and see what was on display. What I found were beautiful paintings and decorative art from the 15th-17th century Netherlands, and some wonderful artifacts depicting some of the rich history of Holland, Michigan, focusing on agriculture, manufacturing, and religion. Most of the history gallery was presented from the perspective of the Dutch European Immigrant. Where was, I wondered, the stories of other members of the community? I had done research and knew from the census that there was a large Latinx community in the area. I also knew there is an African American community, and the Asian population was only briefly mentioned in the History Gallery. Where was the full story of the Indigenous Population, whose words and names are on street signs and businesses all over? Where was

my story? I am a descendant of East European Jews, and although a newer resident to the community, I was familiar with the multi-generational Padnos company family, who are from similar origins and are an important part of the history of Holland.

In my interviews with the board of directors, I made it clear that if I were to be hired, that this lack of inclusive representation had to change. That was the beginning of my journey to make the Holland Museum represent the community more fully. The diverse stories, cultures, and experiences make this community unique, vibrant, interesting, and successful. These contributions need to be known. The voices of these individuals must be heard, not from the white European descendant's perspective, but from the people of these cultures and groups themselves.



Day of the Dead celebration from 2021



Program in 2019



Land Acknowledgement



MLK Day in 2022



MLK Day in 2020

Another important step for the Museum's focus on Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion, (D.E.A.I.), is to make everyone feel welcome. Part of that comes with sharing everyone's story. Another aspect is making people feel welcome by having representation on the board, staff, committees, and volunteers. Seeing someone that looks like you when you walk into a cultural organization can transform how you feel, particularly if historically you have felt unwelcome in those spaces. Labels/signs should be offered in languages in addition to English. Providing forms of communication that provide access to people in wheelchairs, or those with visual or hearing challenges, is a part of being truly equitable as well.

Knowing what is missing does not make me an expert in how to implement change. That is why our journey is taking staff and volunteers through training and exploring a variety of important resources to expand our understanding. This has become part of the Museum's mission and vision. Celebrating our diversity is one of the key values incorporated into our strategic plan.

Recognizing our own personal and collective limitations was instrumental in creating a D.E.A.I. committee made up of a variety of community members, with different backgrounds to help guide us through the work.

The Museum knows this is no small undertaking. Particularly for a small, non-profit organization that has not undertaken this kind of transformation before. We know it is going to be a significant financial expense, require research, and clear communication, as well as community engagement. We do not want to deliberately alienate anyone with this focus, in fact we want to do just the opposite. We strive to be a cultural organization that welcomes everyone, with different perspectives and knowledge, providing a chance to share, learn and celebrate the entire community.

We know that doing this work is not only the "right" thing to do. It will make the Holland Museum more relevant, more impactful, and more sustainable for generations to come.

Ricki L. Levine has been the Executive Director of the Holland Museum for almost 5 years. She has worked for almost two decades in West Michigan non-profit cultural organizations, including the Frauenthal Center in Muskegon, St. Cecilia Music Center in Grand Rapids, and Mason Street Warehouse in Saugatuck. Prior to that, she worked in the for-profit sector in major metropolitan areas where her focus was on merchandising, sales, and marketing. Originally from the New York metropolitan area, Levine came to the Holland area from Los Angeles. She holds a BA from George Washington University, and a certificate of completion from the University of South Florida Muma College of Business Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Workplace program. She is a 2019 graduate of West Coast Chamber Leadership program and serves on the board of directors of Lakeshore Non-profit Association. Levine spends much of her time pursuing her personal journey in diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion. She believes that a future with social justice and equity is possible, but it requires everyone working towards that end. Connect with Ricki at www.linkedin.com/in/rickilevine

