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Leslie Shaffer,
executive
director of
The Delaware
Contemporary

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THE INFLUENCERS

These outstanding directors of Delaware arts and cultural institutions have one thing in common: They're all women.

WORDS BY MINDY TORAN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANGIE GRAY

Molly Giordano rose to the role of executive director at the Delaware Art Museum in early 2021 after serving in various positions.

For many years, women traditionally played a behind-the-scenes role at nonprofit arts and cultural institutions, serving as curators or conservators working in fundraising and public relations roles. But that is changing, especially in the First State. A majority of the museums and cultural institutions upstate are now led by women, including the Delaware Art Museum, the Hagley Museum and Library, The Delaware Contemporary, Nemours Estate, and the Jane and Littleton Mitchell Center for African American Heritage.

The women in these positions work together closely in a way that many of their predecessors did not. They talk frequently and share insights and ideas, providing mutual support that's beneficial to all of their institutions and, ultimately, to the communities they serve. Their main goal is to attract a broader audience and foster a new appreciation for the art, objects and history they steward.

While many of these women took an unconventional path to their current positions, they all possess a genuine passion for what they do and enjoy sharing their knowledge with visitors to their institutions and the next generation of art enthusiasts.

Jill MacKenzie, who became executive director of the Hagley Museum and Library in May 2020, never imagined she would wind up running the institution she has called home for 39 years. "I started out as a public relations coordinator at Hagley in 1982 and had no thoughts about ever becoming executive director," says MacKenzie, a graduate of the University of Delaware who holds both a bachelor's and master's in communication. "I've held various roles here over the years and I've loved every one of them." When her predecessor moved on to a new position in Philadelphia, she was a natural fit for the role.



Jill MacKenzie began at Hagley Museum and Library as a public relations coordinator in 1982. By spring of 2020, when her predecessor moved on, she seemed like a natural fit for the prestigious role of executive director.

"I believe I was selected because of my credentials, not because I'm a woman," she stresses. "The corporate culture of this institution is so open and welcoming, and we want to bring in people who share our passion for the institution's mission to inspire all people to be innovative in their own lives through investigation and exploration of our historical collections, the original DuPont power yard, and online resources." Hagley is the site of the gunpowder works founded by E.I. du Pont in 1802, located on 235 acres along the banks of the Brandywine in Wilmington. The site includes restored mills, a workers' community, and the ancestral home and gardens of the du Pont family.

Many of the best leaders of our arts and cultural organizations say they've

seen things change significantly in the arts industry, where there are now more women around every leadership table taking part in the conversations about financing and revenues, not just fundraising.

Jean Hershner, executive director of Nemours Estate, was "bitten by the history bug" while working part-time as a tour guide at Ash Lawn-Highland, the home of former President James Monroe and his family, near Charlottesville, Virginia. In 2005, when she found herself unexpectedly needing to reenter the workforce, she decided to go to graduate school and pursued simultaneous master's degrees in American studies at Penn State University and nonprofit management at Eastern University.



Jean Hershner, executive director of Nemours Estate since 2018, says she was "bitten by the history bug" early on. At Nemours, she focuses on how to better engage with the public to highlight the "remarkable" story of Alfred I. and Jessie Ball duPont and their legacy. Last summer, she brought a seasonal concert series to the grounds, welcoming a new generation of visitors.

“I believe I was selected because of my credentials, not because I'm a woman.**”**

—Jill MacKenzie, executive director, Hagley Museum and Library

"I loved the history, arts and culture involved in American studies, but knew that in order to run a historical organization I would have to be able to talk to an accountant and a curator and understand what each needed from me," Hershner says. After completing her advanced-degree programs, she found a position in the fundraising office at the York County Heritage Trust (now the York County History Center) in York, Pennsylvania, and went on to serve in a fundraising role at Preservation Pennsylvania. Her efforts led her to Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children (now Nemours Children's Hospital, Delaware). In July 2018, she took on the role of manager of museum operations at Nemours Estate, on the grounds of the hospital.

"Like Jill [MacKenzie], I was never focused on becoming an executive director," she says. "I was just really focused on my role at the estate—how we could make things better and engage with people to highlight the remarkable story of Alfred I. and Jessie Ball duPont and the legacy they have left us."

Love of art and a passion for history lead Molly Giordano, executive director of the Delaware Art Museum, and Leslie Shaffer, executive director of The Delaware Contemporary, to their respective positions.

Giordano began her role at the Delaware Art Museum in 2010 as manager of marketing and public relations while attending the University of Pennsylvania to get her master's in public administration at night and on weekends. "The longer I

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It's important for the next generation [of art administrators] to have a path ready for them to assume leadership roles.

—Leslie Shaffer, director, The Delaware Contemporary

worked at the museum, the more I fell in love with it and the more I saw that the museum could become a community resource for the state and the region,” says Giordano, who rose to her current role in February 2021 after serving in various positions at the museum.

“Ten years ago, perhaps, not having a traditional art background, I probably wouldn't have been chosen for a job like this,” says Giordano, who attended the University of Delaware and also holds a bachelor's in political science and journalism. “It's been a really interesting evolution to blend the things I love so much—art, writing, public administration—into one position. I'm excited to be driving change not just through the programs and the exhibitions the museum offers but thinking more holistically about what it is that the arts can do for our wider community.”

Shaffer, who came to lead The Delaware Contemporary in August of 2019 after initially joining the institution in the programs and public engagement department in 2017, says she always wanted to be an artist but realized she was more of an art history person early on in her career.

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The Delaware Contemporary director Leslie Shaffer stands before artist Shakira Hunt's *Give Me My Flowers* exhibition, in which the artist presents masculinity through different lenses. The series embodies bold imagery to create a relatable experience that recognizes and honors Black and Afro indigenous men, both straight and those who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community.



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"I decided to get involved in a career where I could support artists at all levels of their career, from teaching college-level classes to providing exhibition opportunities," she says. Shaffer has more than two decades of experience in art museums and nonprofit organizations, including leadership roles as the executive director of Artspace in New Haven, Connecticut, curator of education at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and interim executive director at the Contemporary Museum in Baltimore. Shaffer holds degrees in museum studies and art history, and enjoys focusing on public engagement, community interaction and mentoring young professionals.

"It's important for the next generation [of art administrators] to have a path ready for them to assume leadership roles," she says. "Women today are earning their roles and the struggle to achieve success is becoming less evident. It's also important for female leaders like ourselves to have a strong support group of peers with whom we can collaborate, form partnerships and ensure the success of our nonprofits in the state."

Mentorship also plays a key part in promoting arts administration roles to the next generation of female leaders, and can help open doors for career advancement that they might not otherwise be aware of.

"We work very closely with young women looking at careers in the arts," says MacKenzie, who participates in the Lerner Executive Mentor Program at the University of Delaware. "We want young women to know that this is a career option for them and highlight the steps they can take if this is something that interests them."

"We are very fortunate to have numerous outstanding female leaders here in Delaware, including some who I've watched group up through their teen years," says Carla Markell, former first lady of Delaware. "These women cross boundaries of race, socioeconomic status and political

perspectives. Not only does that diversity lead to a broader range of arts offerings to people across our state and region but in addition, young girls from every background can see what's possible when they work hard and follow their passions. I am so proud of these leaders. They make our arts organizations stronger today and position us well for the next generation of leadership, which will make Delaware punch well above its

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This is the first time I've experienced a connection like this, where all the leaders of the institutions talk collectively, work together and support one another in a very significant, meaningful way.

—Molly Giordano, director,
Delaware Art Museum

weight when it comes to the arts world for generations to come," she stresses.

"We all have such a great rapport with one another," adds Giordano. "This is the first time I've experienced a connection like this, where all the leaders of the institutions talk collectively, work together and support one another in a very significant, meaningful way. I believe, through that support in one another, great things can happen for the institutions we lead, as well as the wider community we serve." **DT**

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