

INTRO

(The following is read by Laura Colby over jazz music composed by Manual Cinema)

Hi, I'm Laura Colby and this is *The Middle Woman*, a roadmap to managing the performing arts. I'll be sharing personal anecdotes from my 30 years in the field, exploring the nitty gritty and the technicalities of this job. I'll tell you the story of how I got here and what it's taken for me to work in the industry of the performing arts.

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EPIISODE 23

LAURA COLBY: Hello, this is Laura Colby. I'm the founder and President of Elsie Management, and I am delighted today to have as a guest on this episode, Lisa Richards Toney, who is President and CEO of APAP.

Today, our conversation is titled *Getting to Equity*. And as President and CEO of APAP, as a black woman in this field, for many years, Lisa, I'm so excited to have this conversation with you and looking forward to you sharing wisdom and knowledge and also facts, just straight up facts.

I'd like to start with you introducing yourself to us by way of telling us how you got to this position and arts worker role that you are currently in for APAP.

LISA RICHARDS TONEY: Well, good day, Laura. It is so good to reconnect with you. And in this manner, congratulations to you and to Elsie Management on the success of this podcast. And thank you for inviting me. It's an honor to always be asked. We never take that for granted. And I'm happy to dig into some of these things with you.

I came to APAP on July 1st, 2020, when I started full time as President and CEO. And that was right in the middle of the pandemic time. And it was very, very stressful. I remember looking for a job because I had just come off of being very hands on with caring for my mother who had dementia at the time. I had made the decision that she could be cared for by someone else in an assisted living home environment. It was like I was being led. In December of 2019 I said, by March 1st, I'm going to have this scenario. I'll have had my mom in a better situation. It was really impacting me because I could only do small work.

I was working as a booking agent for a cellist that was very successful then and has really blown up now, but that was like just part time, just me trying to get it done, after having worked as an executive director and director but needed like a bit of a break because I was caring for my mother and I needed to give my attention to that.

But then it came a time, it was like, I need to get back up in this because time is just that. It is time and it's not infinite. And so I made that decision in December, and by March 1, I moved my mom into assisted living. And on March 3rd, I saw this job.

It was during a time where everything felt like it was divine intervention and very intentional. And I knew someone who was in the job and I said, I think it was Krista, I called and I said, Hey, it's good to see you again. She said, you too. And I said, does this job exist? I mean, cause it's just sitting out here on like a random platform. I don't know. It's probably filled. And she says, no. And I said, give me 48 hours to get my stuff together. And I sent it in and lo and behold, it got put forward. And then the process happened and it was a quite a long process because it was a pandemic. We had 13 interviews.

And so it was fine. And by the time I began, I felt really embraced and I felt understood. And I felt like this is going to be a winner. And it has been, I really enjoyed my job. I came into working in this kind of way, like maybe some of our listeners who are wondering, which direction should I go in? Should I be an artist? And then what's the long game of that? Should I go in arts management? And then what does that really mean? And will I be satisfied? Not just professionally, but personally, because to be an artist is the personal, I believe that, and I had a lot of satisfaction in that space. I also had a lot of frustration.

I made a choice, I was 19 years old. I was a student at the Alvin Ailey American Dance School in New York, and the ballet teacher, Mrs. Commendatore, she's so small and I'm so tall, and she's looking up to me and I swear her neck is like completely on the back of its axis and she's like, Lisa, you could stay here and we could maybe work something for Second Company because you have it. However, you can't just leave. I have got to work with you. And I said, what do you mean? And she says, you can't just leave. And I said, but what does that mean? And what she meant was you can't just leave and go back to college because it's going to take you off of this very rigorous daily course, which is required in dance every single day. Hour after hour, the repetition of training your body to be able to do the things it needs to do. And so I was mortified by the idea of someone telling me that I may not be able to go back to college.

I am not the person who's a first generation college graduate in my family. In fact, I have many generations of people who went to college. And the fact that I would somehow, find a way to be okay with not pursuing my higher education just didn't seem like a right decision. And I also had always had a double life in the sense of I was a theater major in college. I was also an English major. I've always had two things running, two trains running, and it's how I've lived my life.

Because I'm the kind that needs some security. And I knew that about myself. I experienced that like I need to know where I'm headed to feel like I can relax and actually be in the space. And so all of these things, security, knowing where you're headed, some predictability at the time. I didn't have an ability to answer the question for what it meant to be a professional dancer. I couldn't answer the things around security, long term viability, and it was so sad. It was terribly frustrating, but more because of the life that we invest ourselves in from a very small child as artists in training.

I said, we need to develop the other side of the artist's brains. I would be in my college classes, I would be the only one in business for the arts. It's like two of us. And I'm like, why isn't the entire cast that's in the show we're in, why aren't they in this class? Because at the end of the day, what's the long view?

I was self-taught in that way to kind of think that way. And it's the thing that actually allows me to do what I do now and to actually still be in the field because I forced myself to think that way. And so consequently, I went back to college. I graduated, I graduated magna cum laude. I was a very successful academic college student, you know, like, it's not that I was like, you know, I don't belong in school. I only belong on the stage. That's not it at all. I decided to pursue graduate studies, and I struggled to figure out what that could be, and I didn't know if I should go for directing. Stage directing was what I was really passionate on. Or if I should go for business, arts management, arts education.

I ended up deciding on arts education and then I realized at NYU I could do that. And then I could take coursework in arts management. And I could build out something that felt comfortable for me because at least I was getting the skills that I thought I would need to then be able to make the next decision for myself.

I worked in arts education consequently for a long time and loved every bit of it. Worked with young people in DC public schools, New York City schools, you know, doing a lot of teaching, did a lot of special arts education projects, arts in education, arts as education, the whole pedagogical approach. Inside and out. And it was my passion. And, I like to think of it as me pouring into young people, what was poured into me.

I came into being in the arts, not because the dance school I went to wasn't about retraining you to be a dance school. We're training you to use the arts as a way of self, as a tool for self expression and actualization. And so that's the philosophy where I came from.

I ended up being an intern at American Place Theater. I worked all the way up to be director of education. I used to get paid \$200 a week to run the light and sound board for non union shows. I am not a techie, but I learned how to do it.

I started leading post play discussions and going out to schools and leading talks with the students about what was happening on stage, vis a vis their lives, vis a vis their curriculum. And then the development director of the theater one day said to me, I need some stats on something. At that time, in the nineties, everybody was applying for Coca Cola money. And I said, I want to be a part of this. So she says, tell me more about A, B, and C. And I told her, and then I said you send me your draft. And if there's anything in there, I think that I may be able to add to, I'll just put it in the notes and you can decide if you want to use it. And that's when I learned what case making was. How do you demonstrate a case around if someone has a vision and how do you explain where your pieces fit in? She made choices and they all weren't, of course, my selections, but it was a wonderful exercise.

And then I said, so this is what really happens in fundraising. And it was my first real opportunity to say, okay, I think I can do this. That was my first attack at, so if I have to fundraise for something I want to do, what else do I have to learn to be able to do the things that I want to do, the kind of art I want to see, the kind of impact I want to see in young people in terms of their experience in the arts, what do I need to learn to do it?

American Place Theater was very instrumental in my life in terms of grounding me with those kinds of opportunities and real experiences to try it out, to sit and try and to see. I was very bold at that time. I always have been very focused and bold. And I told my artistic director, you know what, I want to take the program that we do here in New York to Washington, DC, the kids in DC need it. I had built a reputation of delivering. If you say you're going to do it, I guess it's going to happen because there's nothing I can do to stand in the way. That's how my boss would be. If she says she wants to do it, it's probably going to happen, so we should just let her do it and we can stand by and support along the way.

I love Wynne Hammond, Artistic Director of American Place Theater. Wonderful man. And so he let me do that. And that was a gift. And I was able to bring that

program to D.C. and try out what it meant to be an entrepreneur starting an arts program from scratch.

I thought about, oh, what are concept partnerships? You know, so I learned what it meant to work with not just other arts institutions, but other institutions, period, to parlay what it is that I needed. And to also, promote what it is they needed, and we had a full experience. We worked with the Library of Congress because we were talking about books on stage. We worked with different schools around the city, and I met with the head of the district for education, and I figured out all the content areas they needed to hit, and I could demonstrate that we were doing it. So they said, okay, fine. I work with other theaters, The Kennedy Center. I found different partners in restaurants and businesses who were willing to host events for me and allow me to try my hand at fundraising.

I tried a lot of things when I was really young. I mean, I was a baby. I probably was 25 when I was doing this kind of stuff and I hired fundraising consultants who could give me access to the creme de la creme of Washington DC and show me this. It was a muscle I was building and I always tell young people and people coming in the field just do everything that you think you can and try to weave it together as best you can and record that for yourself because there is no one trajectory.

I was on the board at American University in the arts management program, and I was passionate. We gotta establish a trajectory for the performing arts management track. Like, what does it really mean? What do you need to know first? Second or third, and that's all well meaning, but it's just a waste of time because at the end of the day, it is not there and I'm still here and I have to produce. So for me to solve the problem, it means I've got to then trust that what I've done is meaningful. Log that. Understand the impact of those decisions and that experience and then be able to string it along to something enough to articulate to someone who I'm now looking at a new opportunity for.

Inventiveness, ingenuity, risk taking all those things. That I think as artists, we actually have, they play out very well in arts management, especially when you're trying to establish yourself and to learn all you can, like you've got to be willing to jump into so many different things.

LAURA: I am so glad you brought up taking the time to literally document what you did because as someone in her early 60s now, we forget, we totally forget that, oh gosh, when I was 20, I actually started a service organization. I was 18 at UC Irvine called, the acronym was S T A R T, START, the word START, and it was for Support the Arts.

And I put that together when I was 18 on the campus of UC Irvine, because there wasn't enough money to pay for a choreographer we wanted to bring in to teach a master class. So what did I do? I started this little thing. It had a name and I could raise money to fund a Southern California choreographer to come and teach this master class for us at UC Irvine.

You do what you need to do to get it done. Now, I was probably in my thirties. The first time I actually put it on a resume. I thought, yeah, cause right. I did that, but you know what, if I hadn't put that on that resume, my thirties right now, I probably wouldn't remember that I had actually done that. We often do things in this field before we know it's a job.

LISA: That's right.

LAURA: And it's got a name. And it is one of the many skills that all of us need as arts workers to maintain this framework that ultimately puts shows on stage. And brings audiences into buildings or spaces on a date and time and makes this thing called the live performing arts happen. So I really appreciate that you made that point. Figure out what it is you did and write it down.

LISA: That's right and sometimes it feels the opposite, you know, some say, well, I want to know what I'm going to do. Well, you just had to do something.

LAURA: You just had to get it done.

LISA: And then you go back and then you can see where your holes are and then that's it. You just keep it moving. But, and so I kept it moving. I mean, that was, you know, my entire twenties up until about 35. I worked for American Place Theater and ended up being at the DC Arts Commission.

The real pivotal experience was when I worked for Debbie Allen Dance Academy, I was the first executive director out there. And again, got that experience because I was a company manager for her show and I did my job well as company manager. And that's what I also say, like, you're not always in charge. You have to start somewhere and to really have integrity about whatever it is, the job that you've been given.

My dance teacher class would say, we are an ensemble. There are no light bulbs here. Like everybody has to shine brightly or this thing just doesn't work. And so like my job, which was to ensure that every person participating in that show had their contract and it was correct. And that it was properly complete in, and there were some issues with some, and you had to make sure so that when she hits the

stage, there's accountability for whichever she is expecting them to do. And we all are in agreement on that because when we're not in agreement, it does show when people have issues, it shows.

I stood at the back of the studio and I'm very familiar in a dance studio. Enough to know that if you ain't in the studio, you need to stand over there. It's not your show. And I would stand there quiet as a mouse. And then one day I got up the gumption and I said, Ms. Allen, do you remember me from when I was in a show of yours and blah, blah, blah. And she said, I do. Mm hmm. And, and I said, when you have time, it would be nice if I could sit down with you. I really want to learn more about what you're doing with your school. That's something I'm really interested in because I wanted to always found a school and she let me do it and we sat and talk and we would talk and talk. I told her everything that I thought should happen at her school in a nice way. And she said, Oh my God.

One day she called me, she called me at home. And she said, do you know all that stuff you were talking to me about? And I'm like, yeah, she said, why don't you just come do it? Cause I cannot keep all of that in my mind. This is just way too much. I am too busy. And I said, are you offering me a job? Yeah. Well, what is the job called? I don't know, leader, director, executive director, whatever it should be.

I remember that whole process, which was so funny because who would have think that that would have been the result, but to be present in the moment and genuinely in the moment. and seeing opportunities in the moment was the trail for me. And I ended up doing that job and I enjoyed it very much. I learned a whole lot about myself as a leader, learned a whole lot about managing people, and then moved back to Washington, eventually landed at the Arts Commission, worked as a producer, and then worked my way up to be the interim director for the organization.

I do understand community engagement. I do understand when taxpayers are investing in a value and a quality, which is having the arts be a part of their everyday life. So it opened up a new dimension in how I look at the possibilities of what our work can do for communities. It was great.

When I looked at APAP, you know, it's a membership organization. It's very similar to some of the work I did at the Commission just because you got so many people and you got to be able to distill community. You got to be able to understand who you're talking to and what they are expecting and what they need and how to represent them well. Because there's a membership organization, so people are paying to be a part of this organization for their own access points, and you've got

to represent their needs to ensure that you're providing what it is they expect and they want.

And so, mentality wise, I got it, and I've always been someone who has enjoyed engagement. It's a job that requires a lot of people engagement. It requires to really be nimble because you've got to be able to take in what people are saying and look at your list and go, does this match? And if not, take that under advisement and then delegate and keep it moving. And so it works for my, I feel like my nature and some of the skills I've developed by way of the jobs I've had, and it gives me a bit of a long view because it's the kind of position as an organization, the Association of Performing Arts Professionals has been around for a long time. Its mission is to ensure that this presenting and booking and touring field is successful at the end of the day. And so that has long view. And I care deeply about that too, personally.

LAURA: Yes. Well, neither of us would be here if we didn't. Thank you. So wonderful to hear that trajectory. And I love that basically, you wrote your own job at the Debbie Allen Dance Academy. And this is why, dear listeners, we need you because there are people in this field who are very open to hearing someone say: have you thought about this? Have you looked at it that way, and this is the only way we're going to keep this incredible field moving forward and into the future.

So equity. I'd like to acknowledge that there are probably listeners of this episode who may never have had any guidance or instruction or framework around equity.

What is equity? We're just going to start with a textbook definition at this point. The term equity refers to fairness and justice and is distinguished from equality, whereas equality means providing the same to all. Equity means recognizing that we do not all start from the same place and we must acknowledge and make adjustments to these imbalances. The process is ongoing, requiring us to identify and overcome intentional and unintentional barriers arising from bias or systemic structures.

As usual, we will have a glossary for this episode, and in that glossary will be what I think is one of the best visuals. Representing equity versus equality so listeners, you will be able to click on the glossary and you'll be able to see that visual yourself because I found that very helpful the 1st time I saw this drawing, I was like, oh, okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. I get it now. Thank you for the drawing and it's burned in my brain and I hope it will help you as Lisa and I talk about equity in our field. Equity as arts workers, equity as our lived experience being women, me as a white woman, Lisa as a Black woman, both of us born in the United States, both of our families go back generations in this country. That will be the basis of our discussion.

For me, my brain really shifted around the word equity and, and its connotation when I realized we don't, we, the we, of this population, we don't all have the same resources. And certainly artists are often without many resources. We also, didn't all necessarily have the same kind of support structure as children and young adults. We didn't all necessarily have the same family experience. We didn't all have the same housing experience growing up.

This came to me in an early meeting in the Creating New Futures time, which happened in April of 2020. And I made a statement in a meeting using the word we, and I was called out on it and said, what, who's your, we, what, we, are you talking about? I don't think I'm in your we. And I had a moment where I realized, Oh, right, you know, and it's so easy for us to speak in the, we and not acknowledge that oh, hold on. I can't speak on behalf of, in that case, it was about 4 or 5 people who on that call who I really didn't know. And I'm really grateful that they, that they caught that. And my brain had this adjustment about around the word we, which to me is the embodiment of this definition of equity. Because the ground is not level, there is nothing fair about this game, nothing. And you can get in this game, and you can make a place for yourself, and you can find a chair at that table for yourself.

I hope these episodes can help give you some insight on how to open that door and get in the room and have the confidence to make a place for yourself in this field, be that as an artist or self represented artists or young manager, young producer, or the next programmer and curator of a festival that Lisa and I haven't even heard of yet, because you're going to cook that festival up, and you're going to go get the damn funding, and you're going to make the next best festival for, you know, pick your favorite city in this wonderful country of ours. Because that story, I hope you've heard that story told, because that is happening, and has happened, and I find that very inspiring.

LISA: Yep. There is definitely a way in. And, you know, I remember feeling like, when I grew up here in Washington, DC, there was a dance school. It's like everybody went to, it's quite expensive, but everybody, again, who's the everybody, but you know, you paid attention. If you really thought you were going to be doing something, you were going there. And I didn't go there because my parents, well, we were not rich, we were not poor, but you know, it was like, that's just not happening.

I remember for a while feeling really like, I just haven't had the kind of training that's going to allow me to take the leap into this. And I don't know where that's going to lead me. And so I always had that like, soured, am I really going to be able

to make it? You know, I just haven't had the investment. And then it was when I was 12 years old when it was like, forget it. I'm busting in this, which is late by traditional dance performance standards. I had teachers, you know, beating my feet and all kinds of things to get me into condition, you know, according to what they thought. I remember going to a audition for a universal ballet Academy. And it was horrible. I mean, the lady was like, well, you know, you'd be better at modern.

My body I was always tall and rather thin. I've always had the ideal body, mostly for a soloist. You know, like I needed to be better than everybody else because I was not gonna be part of the core, because I was standing out. And then I would, why is modern or jazz or something easier, you know, like is, is the technique or the execution, like less demanding. And it was like this whole culture of feeling like the pinnacle of excellence in dance is, you know, classical ballet. And anything else was just subpar and oh, you did that because you couldn't do this and it was bad.

I was somewhat confident, but I had to really find the confidence. Because I had all these other messages around me, not necessarily supporting the fact that I was choosing to do this. So it was not a comfortable existence, by far. And in some ways, I think that is another reason why I said, heck with it. I'm going to go into management because I feel like I can start from a place where I'm starting, and I'm not defeating something because I didn't do it yesterday.

That whole access in dance of if you didn't invest when you were two, you're nothing. People in dance know what I mean. And I see it with young kids now, you know, teenagers who want to dance and you know, you can see it on their faces. Their bodies haven't formed to that level of flexibility because that wasn't their training. It's like a gymnast. And what's to be of them at this point. I'm grateful that we are finally more inclusive around dance and dance is actually a cultural expression. Hello. So there are many different ways to do it, and ways people do it, and ways certain bodies are, more conducive to do certain things, and it's a real thing, and it's a good thing.

It was a lot, growing up with that, and I think that I wanted my long view. I'm looking at the business of my life, and I wanted to have a good life. And so I decided I needed to get into the business of this so I could learn it and be viable for it.

LAURA: Yeah. Yeah. Incredible.

To talk about the roster of Elsie management, representation is real as we've been talking about through these episodes and the Elsie Management roster is comprised of dance companies, in the genres of dance theater, what we call outdoor spectacle

and circus, and of the 19 artists slash companies we represent right now, 57% are female led 57 5 7 Of the 19 companies we represent, 31% of them are led by people of color.

So, numbers matter. Data matters. The way my roster looks has a lot to do with me and the Elsie staff reading the room. For us, what reading the room is, is listening to our buyers and our buyers are our programmers, curators and presenters out in the field who have the capacity to support a live performance of the artists we represent. And that includes being able to realize the artist's vision through a high quality professional presentation. And that could be a site-specific work in a bar. It could be something in the middle of a field. And yes, it could be on your perfectly beautiful proscenium stage with 1200 seats. So we work in a variety of spaces, all shapes and sizes.

I'm going to keep my timeline focused on the post pandemic time, because very much the murder of George Floyd, it's a date for our field, it's a date for our country, for many of us, it's a before and after moment, time stamp, if you will, and the reckoning that our nation went through in the wake of his murder was hugely significant.

And for our programmers. I am strictly speaking about the programmers in the United States, many of them really, really took notice and had a good look at their programming and went through a real process of research, investigation, knowledge, and having honest conversations about the scale of representation they were or were not presenting.

So, female led voices, BIPOC, artists of color, BIPOC-led artist organizations. Across the board, it was recognized that, oh, whoops, we're really not doing this very well. It's not just enough to program that one black dance company during Black History Month. It's just not enough. Why would you only present that black dance company only during Black History Month? They're a dance company. You should be presenting them at any time. So in response to the field, the part of reading the room, and this is the part where my 30 years, Elsie's nearly 30 years of being in the field, we now have very established relationships with many, many programming institutions. We've got, you know, 100 to 200 ongoing running conversations happening. And even with the change of programming leadership, we still have those conversations with those institutions. So we respond when we hear things. And when we hear, this is what I need, I am looking for this: We are going to shift our, our mission and vision for more of that.

For those have been listening to the podcast, know that my curation of my roster comes 1st and foremost from passion and a visceral response to the work I see.

The work on my roster. All of it is incredibly singular and not just another version of another show that we've all seen a million times, or that same story. And these artists are making singular work that only they can make. And their stories move me, their aesthetic wows me. Something is deeply resonating in my guts when I am in the presence of their work. That is the first step of curation on my roster.

And yes, Anna and Jimena, my team and I, we have an eagle eye on representation on our roster. Female voices are incredibly important to us. Well, now that the programmers are paying more attention to the fact that maybe they were only presenting white male-created work, This is a good thing for us. We've had a long history of representing female identified artistic voices. Same with artists of color. We've always had artists of color on our roster, but now we are, you know, a lot of our programming phone calls will start with the question, what is it you're looking for this year? I'd like to point to the fact that these are our artists of color on our roster. If you are trying to meet certain needs of your mission and your vision.

We're not in this field blindly. I'm not going to tell you that we're only curating our roster to make presenters happy. That's not how this works, but there is a thoughtfulness and a care. When we sat in that post George Floyd moment, or when, in our own reckoning, Answering the question, how do we as Elsie management line up with this demand or with this shift or with this lens change and looking back and recognizing, yeah, we could have done better with this, and we need to pay more attention to that. This has been our experience to date, and we will continue with our eyes wide open. As we move further into the future.

LISA: Well, during the time where many people were awakened and I think people like to now use the concept of a woke culture in a very derogatory way as if you're singularly focused on advancing something at the expense of business needs or practical tools and so forth and it's really sad, but I'm going to still use it because I know what it means.

When people were awakened, because if your environment and your experience and the people you're around, choice of circles, if it doesn't show you what it shows you, you don't know. You can't act on what you don't know. And as they say, our creators, as artists, our producers, you know, they create what they know. And art buyers, I mean, you buy what you know. Presenters, you know, as art buyer. Agents, you're gravitating towards an artist for what you know, like what does speak to you and what creates that spark for you. You have to look at yourself all the time always being reflected.

Who am I? Where do I come from? What has been my experience? What is my reality? What I've been challenged with? And you have to be honest about where

you are and then where you haven't been. And the reality is, is when you're awakened to the so many places where you haven't been. I mean, I think this field as an arts - the curiosity at least should be awakened, you know, and then once genuine curiosity and getting to know you process creates respect because you get to know someone and you know that their vision or mission is not just something that's cute on the shelf, but it has real tendrils and meanings and supports to who they are and why they are and what they stand for and I can respect that, you know, even if it's not my experience, I respect that it's deep for them.

Acknowledging that this field has really been dominated, it's like the pyramid and the people at the top of it, because of the way we look at the industry and business overall, there is no requirement. The base is holding you up. There's no requirement to go to the bottom and look at who else is holding you up. You're at the top on the values that we have at the top, which are usually around finance and notoriety or fame or whatever that may be. So why would you go look at something that you don't know about? It's not going to get you to the top as far as you're concerned because you're at the top based on those values.

That time during the pandemic, it showed us that we need to look deeper than what we think our own pinnacle is. And when you open your eyes and become truly awakened to those people and ideas around you, if you're really an artist, how can you not see? How can you not be curious? How can you not want to know more? How can you not appreciate the experience? Because we all are looking at things or experience, and it's like, there's something visceral that happens in you when you have a well of understanding about something that you didn't know before. It does for me, at least.

When you think about the work of the presenter and its job to give its community art, and then you can add up more, a lot of other pieces and words to fulfill that mission. Who is your community? What do they want? What do they need? Where do you want to take them? What's your own vision for the center that you may be presenting for? How deep is that? You know, is it a vision that is socially-oriented in terms of its place in a community? You have to ask yourself all of that. And you have to be thoughtful and intentional around then how you fulfill it.

The reality is that there's also the sustainability business side of it like how much more can you practically expose your people to, your people meaning audiences to, that will actually help you with your bottom line. It's not like our field was doing that great. You know, it's not like the performing arts is, you know, everybody's at 75 percent capacity every night in their houses. It's not true. And there's room for growth and additive space to fill out a vision so that we can be even more successful

APAP as it is the service organization for this for this field presenting booking and touring and says, you know what, let's allow people to do it. But let's give them a little challenge and let's do some math. And let's put people's feet to the fire. You say you want to do the thing, then this is an example of what we think it takes for it to truly be impactful and to have a lasting impact and indelible impact in not just your season, but in the institution itself, which we are really about promoting the institution and make sure the institutions for presenting, booking, and touring are strong.

And so the 10 20 30 pledge is a pledge that we invited our members to take. If they were so interested to do that, allow yourself 10 years to deal with the institution because systemic systems are difficult to change. And systems again, success model is a system that's based on what and if now you're saying, I want to, you know, bring in indigenous performance because we are in this community and but yet we act like we're not neighbors and we're not of the people. So we've got to now reevaluate the systems for success. And often those systems are quite damaging to anything that looks like it's opposing that success. And if it wasn't a part of its success model, you're going to have to dismantle it. So when you dismantle those systems, it takes time to open itself up to what a new system for success could be, a new model.

That's why we got 10 years. Then you got 20 percent of your operating budget. I think it is.

LAURA: It's 20 percent of your programming or roster.

LISA: Right? So that's the way of like, Putting your money where your mouth is like, then put the money towards the individuals and the companies that are doing the work to give them an opportunity to do the space. And then look at your operations goes back to your system and go up to 30, 30 percent of your operating budget and how you're spending your resources. We're not talking about that 20 percent we're talking about who's on your team, you know where your personnel staff, what do they look like, and what are their values and what gifts in that space do they bring so that your work is forever going to be challenged in that way? Many of us are not for profit at all, but some of us are, have that structure. What are your boards representing and where there's that strength in having governance over your organization?

What does that really look like? Who are you hiring when you had to do a catering event? Who'd you choose? Did you look broadly around the community or did you

just go with who you thought was successful because of a very myopic view of what you think is success.

LAURA: Yeah, the person, the person Susie recommended who just catered, you know, her cousin's wedding. You have to look. If you don't look, you're not going to necessarily find. And that curiosity, that curiosity you talked about, that also can translate into discovery because it's super easy to just phone this stuff in people and not be bothered and-

LISA: It's so easy.

LAURA: And it's lazy. And that's what contributes to the systemic continuity that keeps this going without disruption. And the change is necessary because the people you bring under your roof, the vendors you hire, the artists you put on your stage, representation matters. The counting, the percentages, the math matters.

I remember a time in New York, there was an artist-led effort to point out to the dance programmers in New York City that they were all booking white male-led companies. And they didn't really believe it. And then when the numbers were presented to them, it was all about the gender gap. Where are the women? Where are the women in this field? And why aren't you commissioning us and helping us up this ladder? Cause that's not what's going on here. You are programming the same male choreographers, predominantly white, year in, year out. It was a very early moment of reckoning, but these moments of, Whoa, hold on everybody. We got to stop here and count. It's real. It has significance and we can gather ourselves and we can move forward.

So, I love the 10 20 30 APAP pledge and we signed it and we actually meet these numbers and abide by these numbers. As a small business owner, having walked myself and staff through this process of, again, acknowledgement, looking, really looking. And seeing. And the holes were presented to us. Like we have never represented Native American artists. And that is something we want to change for sure. And I love your point about our theaters being in communities and these communities are not necessarily ever reflected on these stages and how important that is to acknowledge that and do what we need to do to make a shift.

LISA: Yeah, the professionalization of industries in general, it's almost like the effort to extract from community so that it could be something else and that that was to be successful. And you can apply that to almost anything, you know, if you extract something from its community, it's. Ah, you're making it, you're leading it. If you leave your community growing up, ah, you've made it. It was almost like, it's such a fallacy. It's false reasoning. It doesn't make sense because at the end of the day,

everything influences the other and you need that community to support the thing. And I think that's one of the greatest gifts that we had during this time is that people actually finally realized that. And you can see it all of a sudden people who were in arts education, like me, you know, we're no longer relegated to the back of the office.

They want to figure out the values that we were working within. How do we put that to the forefront of what it means to run this organization from a C suite level? It's like all of a sudden those values around community and like they were important. And for too long, you know, it's that whole conquer mentality that this country was even founded on. Let me rip it from its origins and create a success model. It's not permanent and the ancestors and all the things won't have it. Because we will continue to have cycles where these reckonings happening, we have a bottom fallout within humanity, and we're asked to right ourselves again.

LAURA: I, for one, am so grateful for these moments of acknowledgement and foundational shift and change.

When I entered the field, I was a woman in her late thirties. I was treated like a stupid little girl and, you know, being five foot four. Okay. And blonde, I guess I was stamped as a certain kind of character. And as I said, in, I think the very first episode, no one opened any doors I had to pry them open. And I had to find a chair and pull it up to the table and make space for myself in that room. I did that and here I am 30 years later, I can look at this field now, and I have a very different perspective.

At the time when I entered the field, it was predominantly white male programmers. And now it's very exciting to be working with all these female programmers. There's been a massive shift. In those C suite jobs, Lisa, and it's very exciting to me, and also people of color, and the field has absolutely changed in 30 years, and the field can change again in the next 30 years, especially with the contribution of the younger arts worker coming into the room, which is critical and vital as we move forward.

To keep reaching for this equity that we are really looking for, so that our stages are a reflection of community of population of the lived experience of other people who, when I say other people, as opposed to the predominant which was the white male voice on those stages for so many years.

Both of our organizations, I mean, APAP and Elsie couldn't be two more different organizations. Both of them have female leadership. Both of them have majority female staff. My entire staff is female. And it's a great pleasure that I'm working

these days with so many more female programmers in the field. That's really, I'm finding that very exciting.

LISA: Yeah.

LAURA: I'd be curious to hear what are your hopes?

I mean, you are the leadership for the national service organization in the performing arts and primarily serving the United States. But as we know, we have international members that they've had from all over the world. What are your hopes for our field?

LISA: Oh, I have so many. I'll try to focus because there are so many and one of the things that we are doing within our strategic planning process for APAP is trying to distill our service to the field, which will be wrapped in our hope.

I feel like we've kind of hit rock bottom as a field and it laid bare things and some things disappeared and burnt up and went away and then some things are still there hanging on. And so it is the right time to think about. What is that? What will now hold it? And I think that because there has been so much upheaval, we have so many new people doing this work, and we have so many more people other than white men doing this work.

For APAP, as I see, to really be able to embrace them, to be the resource of knowledge. How do all the many practices that can be very successful when you're doing this kind of work to be able to connect so that the field is not this pyramid space, but it really does function as an ecosystem. And so as opposed to this top, that's really hard for anybody who's this base on the bottom to kind of even, gosh, even see clearly, let alone touch. To kind of put us all on a circle because that person or that entity that was at the top is just a piece of the ecosystem. It still needs you and you and you in order for it to work. It was at the top because you were holding it there.

What I hope is that we begin to really value each part of the work in the ecosystem that we are within so that it really has an opportunity to be strengthened and that we're not in opposition to one another because it just weakens, it weakens for us. I hope that in doing that, we're strengthening opportunities for artists.

The artists just want to work. They want to be in a quality environment and space and have consistent opportunities that resonate with their own vision for themselves, of course, and all these things are not going to matter. It's about us working together because this artist is here at this entity, it's going to now need to

move to yours and then to yours and then to yours so that it and like others can do. it's very, very, very best.

This collective work and responsibility, which is a Kwanzaa principle, is really, really important. And I hope we do more of that and that we are okay with doing more of that. And we don't feel that we're relegating ourselves to a position of being less than, but really looking at success as being collaborative.

The long view for the artists is really important. I think that in order to truly have a diverse field, you have to have a space where the leg up is that if you've not seen the long view because you've never had the privilege to be in the part of it, that somehow the field can create that for you that we can tell people. This is what you're working towards. This is what success looks like. This is what it's going to be because to say, Oh, I'm going to be a presenter. I don't know people who grow up saying that. You know, I don't know anybody who understands what it even is. A presenter, what are you talking about?

A presenter assumes a certain level of resource too. And so being able to know all the spaces that are in line with that. You know, whether you want to call it a presenter or something different, but the places that you're working towards and to understand that these, this is the path to do that. And the reason why being a presenter working in this industry and all the entities that come in between in support of to make that presentation really strong is just as important and has to be thriving and so really giving people a step up to see that. I certainly didn't see it. If you'd ask me what I would, I would never say I want to be a presenter. I don't even think I would ever have articulate. I would have said a producer. I knew what that was. But I didn't quite understand the big picture of it all.

The more we can stop shrouding in secrecy around what is it that we do and what makes it successful and what makes one successful or this model and give people the option to choose their way into what they see as success. We're going to be stronger for it because it can't just be 10 presenters. We have so many people and there's so many stories to be told that are truly grounding for what it means to just exist as a human on this planet.

Thank God something gives us hope when we go see art. You know, it's that space of grounding that you get when you're reminded that you're more than that media clip. You're more than a stereotype. You have a full story that when told properly and thoughtfully, everybody can sit around it and feel it's universal and it's a beautiful thing. And that's what the presenter does. They create the environment and make it happen so that that actually happens. It's people work, you know, it's humanitarian work. It's working with people.

LAURA: But it's also social justice work in many ways.

LISA: Right.

LAURA: And it's advocacy. I mean, it's social justice work. I'm not suggesting artists on stage with placards, screaming slogans, but social justice work in terms of ensuring a level of representation of the population and the communities that are around and also advocating for those artists who have often been completely overlooked and just not in the room.

LISA: Yeah, a lot of power.

LAURA: A lot of power, a lot of power.

LISA: The choices. Yeah.

LAURA: It's a huge country. With such a diverse population in so many ways.. And so this is the part where I feel that it's our job as arts workers producing, managing, presenting these artists to go out and find them and have that curiosity you pointed to earlier, because otherwise we get super comfortable and we're just going to be the same old, same old, because that's what we're accustomed to. We're familiar with that. But again, that curiosity leading to discovery, leading to something none of us have ever seen before or ever even imagined before. And this is the part where it makes me cringe when people say, Oh, so and so discovered this artist. It's like, you know, that artist was making their work. Okay. So and so I guess has a lot of power because maybe there's some big whoop dee doo Hollywood producer or whatever their job is, but they're way up on that ladder that you pointed to Lisa and their gaze fell upon this artist who is making this work and all of a sudden this artist is discovered. It's like, that artist had a mother and a father and I'm sure that their family knew they were making this work.

My point being, there are so many artists making so much work that we never ever see or have access to. And so what can we do? What can we do in our positions of privilege, frankly, to find their work and see it and share it. And share it with larger community, broader platforms, if the artist wants that.

LISA: Right. And to the point of really thinking outside of whatever your box had been. You got to look at the rubric for how you make decisions and on the equity lens, you may have to make some adjustments to what it means to now be in space with this artist. If the rubric that you use to of selection or whatever your process may have been may need to have some adjustments may need to have some step

ups may need to have more funding, may need to have more pieces to how you create this opportunity and it's a willingness to do that too, not just to see who's out there, but to make sure that they have a proper experience and what is it that you may need to alter being mindful enough to just say this, this, you know, the way we do things here is very alienating to maybe a particular community of artists. And to be able to examine that is really important.

LAURA: And that speaks to an awareness and consciousness-raising. One of the constructs I thought of immediately when you pointed to the protocol of attending theater.

LISA: Mm-Hmm.

LAURA: Is not conducive to the Native American protocol. You know, that sense of time, the show was going to start at eight o'clock period, and if you're late, you can't get in, like, that's not a thing. The thing that you have to be quiet. In most Native American communities, the children are not silenced. That is part of fundamental parenting. They do not silence their children. Well, as a young white child, I can tell you, I've spent many, many years being silenced. It was expected. The be seen and not heard.

LISA: Right.

LAURA: So, we have to make room and raise our consciousness and awareness around other people's protocols and other people's needs and, how they may want to share in an experience of performing arts experience with us and they may have different needs than us. And what are we doing to kick open the doors and welcome, welcome other populations into our theaters as audience. Yeah. And this is all, all part of this equity equation and equity lens. Requires some education, thoughtfulness, awareness and care. Yeah.

LISA: Yes. One thing I will say, I reflect on my experience coming up and all the identities that I tried on to become who I thought I should be, as a, what does it mean to be a arts executive? Or an arts leader or an artsworker and how those even words, you know, have changed over time and where I've embraced parts of them and then, you know, kind of shunned some parts of them. I was writing a piece reflecting on the many years when I wore all suits. And it was, it's funny because it's nothing wrong with the suit, but it was the transition of uniform for me from leotards and tights and leg warmers and cut up sweatshirts. And, you know, all of a sudden I'd go to the cleaners, I was like, this is different. I'm just not using vinegar in the wash to get out the sweat.

And I remember wearing these suits and spending time with people who I knew had a lot of suits and borrowing suits and telling me where I should buy suits. I remember all the things that I learned and I remember trying to become the person who felt worthy enough to wear the suit. And it was, it was a trip because sometimes I would feel like I'm busy, so busy becoming that I'm not really grasping what it is that I'm becoming.

That mask of performance that we all have worn as artists, period, you know, and we get that mask of performance. But when you're talking about. Going into a field where you don't quite know the trajectory, and you want to get in and you also in many times, yes, the only Black woman in a room when it got to be on a certain level and people's like, you know how I got there. And to feel ready and accepted. The best visual for me was remembering me trying on these suits and trying really hard to assume a posture that felt natural in it. And I was really good at it. And I remember someone telling me, you know, you were just a suitor. Like when I was at the arts, I mean, I was, you know, that was my world. And it was so revelatory during this time of reckoning because there was a greater permission to be more of your whole self, even to come to work in the performing arts as your whole self. And people said we want to support someone's whole self.

I haven't talked as much about my desires, my successes, my failures, and being an artist. I've never had a chance to talk about that. It's almost, I had to bury it, but being in this space at APAP and it's because of the job I have now, which I've reached a point where I can kind of talk about what, what I think we should talk about. And there, there is that too, paying your dues, but it's also a space of just being around so many different kinds of arts workers and knowing that there just is all of us and it takes all kinds and having a comfortability not to feel that you have to be one or the other. And you can also look at all of the experiences as I've had and say, you know, that was really great. And that wasn't great.

This job gives me space to, like, reflect on all of it. And it's refreshing, you know, so it's one time when I feel as though I can be more than the title says, you know, it's Lisa, and I try to approach people like that and remind them that I am Lisa. And if you ever need to talk to me, you're talking to Lisa, and we're going to get to what it is, and I have a lot of different hats and experiences, thankfully, that I can draw on that all fit in with being the head of APAP, and I like that.

LAURA: Yeah, because ultimately we are humans, and we need to show up as humans.

I want to say thank you so much, Lisa, for setting this time aside for this conversation. I so appreciate it.

LISA: Thank you for inviting me. I've enjoyed it.

LAURA: And listeners, you know what I'm going to say, go buy a ticket for a show or don't buy a ticket, go find something free because surely where you are, there's a performance happening that you can get into somehow, be that with a ticket or without and have an experience that you wouldn't have had. And write to me about it, drop me a line, because I want to hear from you. Until next time.

(Fade out with jazz music by Manual Cinema)