

Bimonthly magazine of the Association of Science-Technology Centers

# Dimensions

March • April 2019

**The Power  
of Small**







Before and After: exterior of the Mid-Hudson Children's Museum in Poughkeepsie, New York, 2012 and 2018. Photo courtesy Mid-Hudson Children's Museum

## When Small Is the Secret Sauce

*By Lara Litchfield-Kimber*

You learn a lot about yourself, your appetite for taking risks, and what you value professionally when you work for a small operation. I started big; I had to work my way to small. Twenty years ago, I began my career in the nonprofit sector as a leadership gifts officer in a 350-person institutional advancement unit at a large Ivy League university. From there, I led a 16-person development shop at a small private college before making the leap into the science museum field in 2004. I had initially scoffed at the idea of joining what seemed like a tiny team at the Sciencenter in Ithaca, New York, until I realized it would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to advance my personal mission of opening doors for others by combining my passion for science education with my skills as a professional fundraiser.

My eight years at the Sciencenter provided me with unprecedented opportunities to develop my leadership skills, build relationships with colleagues from across the science museum field, and try new—and sometimes completely off the wall—things to spark people's imaginations and interest in science. Because of this, when the opportunity came to lead a transformation at a very small, struggling children's museum in Poughkeepsie, New York, I knew it sounded like just my kind of challenge.

I've now been the executive director of the Mid-Hudson Children's Museum (MHCM) since 2012.

I'm not going to lie—I knew I was inheriting what I lovingly call “a mess.” The museum had come dangerously close to closing only a year prior and was on life support with financial backing from a local foundation. The core programming, finances, and staff were in disarray. The physical facility was tired and badly worn. Attendance was unsustainably low. And years of underwhelming community engagement had taken their toll on the organization's reputation in the community.

MHCM is located in downtown Poughkeepsie, a small city marked by high violent crime and a poverty rate of 35%; roughly 40% of children in pre-kindergarten have at least one parent in jail during the school year. Although the demographics of our own neighborhood certainly give us pause, they also illustrate tremendous opportunity for an organization that is willing to square up to and address pressing community needs as a strategy for its own transformation.

We did exactly that.

In the museum field, we often hear of organizations attempting to shift from “nice to necessary” in the eyes of their communities as a means for increasing impact and building core relationships. In our case, executing this shift would serve as our survive-then-thrive strategy—and one that would be accelerated by our “smallness.”



## what we learned

Six years into this grand adventure, we are a completely different organization. MHCM has rebuilt its board and staff, and has a solid organizational strategy that is 100% grounded in the needs of families in our region. By focusing on increasing equity and access to early learning experiences, advancing health and wellness, and building community, we created a framework onto which an entirely new museum program was created. This clarity allowed us to build lasting partnerships and pursue novel initiatives to tackle emerging community needs, even when these needs fell outside the traditional boundaries of what might be expected of a children's museum.

In six years, we've grown our attendance from 18,000 to 80,000, and our budget has more than doubled to \$1 million. In this time, we have built solid relationships with several new funders and

have seen our status in our community elevate to "preferred partner" among agencies, schools, and local government.

### *What are the elements of our secret sauce?*

- 1. Build a team of impact players.** Whether considering new staff members or new board candidates, we have adopted a strategic method to identify and recruit people with specific experiences, skills, and mindsets that we need to have at the table. We want the best of the best, and have become disciplined at passing on people who do not advance the strength of our team.
- 2. As a leader, stay close to the ground.** When I was a new executive director, I launched a three-month listening tour of parents and leaders from business, government, higher education, and the

Kids Kitchen is a free learn-to-cook program offered each week at MHCM's Poughkeepsie Waterfront Market. Photo courtesy MHCM





non-profit sector, during which I asked one question: “What are the top three needs of families with young children in our region?” The responses fell into three general needs buckets: school readiness, health and wellness, and community building. These buckets became the foundation of a new organizational strategy because they represented the most relevant work we can do to support our audience. Even now, I seek out opportunities to meet directly with families in our community to discuss their needs.

**3. Think big, then execute at scale.** We look to keep our finger on the pulse of big issues affecting our region and the world and then implement local solutions. For example, in response to an alarming increase in urban food insecurity in Poughkeepsie, MHCM launched a new public farmers market as part of its core programming to connect city residents and families with locally sourced, healthy food. This is not typically the core work of children’s museums. In fact, we became the first children’s museum in the country to launch a farmers market. This meant that we needed to go outside the field to understand and learn best practices for farmers market management. This experience allowed us to seek out and bring best practices from the national farmers market field back to our own community, plus it opened the door to new programmatic and promotional partnerships.

**4. Sharpen your decision making.** We often hear that small museums need to “do more with less.” I’ve always been bothered by this sentiment as it comes from a deficit mindset and seems self-limiting. Instead, we see ourselves as powerful financial stewards responsible for making the best decisions with the resources we have. This way of thinking forces us to question every opportunity by considering multiple factors, refine our group decision-making process, and get comfortable saying no to things that are not an absolute yes. It also forces us to let go of activities that no longer move us forward.



Each year, 385 pre-kindergarten children visit the Mid-Hudson Children’s Museum for free monthly field trips as part of the museum’s school readiness initiative. Photo courtesy MHCM

**5. Embrace strategic partnerships.** With a staff of 12, the only way that we could create the transformational impact in our community was to partner with others. Very early in our school readiness work, we decided to leverage the expertise of the museum field and bring it to Poughkeepsie. With funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, we created a partnership with the Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center to develop profoundly innovative early learning field trips for every child enrolled in a Poughkeepsie pre-kindergarten program. Now in its fifth year, we have a strong local network of early educators, families, and museum educators committed to preparing at-risk children for success in school.

This recipe has pushed us to where we are right now: launching a major expansion project to create a new four-museum STEM campus at the Poughkeepsie Waterfront on the Hudson River. One thing is certain as we move toward this bold vision: we plan to leverage our smallness as a strategic advantage as we look to go big.

---

**Lara Litchfield-Kimber** ([llkimber@mhcm.org](mailto:llkimber@mhcm.org)) is executive director of the Mid-Hudson Children’s Museum in Poughkeepsie, New York.