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Interviewed by Jonathan Zhang

Please share a little about yourself. As the Director of Content Strategy, what keeps you motivated to continue to expand The Lawrence Hall of Science's community involvement?

My name is Michelle Rodriguez, and I am the Director of Content Strategy at the Lawrence Hall of Science. For a little over 10 years now, I've been in formal and informal education. I started as a classroom teacher: a middle school science teacher. I've always loved science my whole life. I grew up going to places like the Lawrence, California Academy of Sciences, and the Exploratorium, so I just really love informal education. But I didn't know at the time that it was a job. I was a teacher, but the classroom environment wasn't really for me, so I left formal education and applied to a job at an aquarium because I was a marine biologist by training. They actually had this other job as an aquarium educator, and I was like "wait, you can teach in an aquarium?" And so, I've been in informal education ever since: aquariums, museums, and now the Lawrence Hall of Science. I firmly believe in free choice learning; I think it is great for people to be able to find their passions and find what's interesting to them and explore different rabbit holes. In my role, I get to think about what those stories are that we're telling on the science center floor to the public and to the people who help us create the exhibits. How do their stories show up? We've been having this fundamental shift at the Lawrence, incorporating hands-on science for people to play around and explore new things. Whether they fail or succeed, they are experiencing what it is like being a scientist. Now we want to broaden the idea of who does science and who science is for. We've been thinking a lot about representation on the science center floor like scientists or young people. Scientists are not all old White men; we have Black scientists, Brown scientists, Asian scientists, Indigenous scientists, etc. We want to make sure that people, when they come to us, see themselves represented in science and see the different kinds of science too. It's not just academia, even though we're part of UC Berkeley. That really motivates me is to bring more people to see science as a part of their lives.

Do you speak another language? If so, what do you speak? How did you learn the language?

I speak a 2-year-old level Mandarin. My mom is from Taiwan. She came over to the United States for graduate school, UC Berkeley actually. Then, she met my dad who is Swiss-German, born in New York, so I have a mixed background. My mom taught me Mandarin before my brother and I went to bed. At the time that I was growing up, Cantonese was much more prevalent in the Bay Area, and now I feel like Mandarin is a little bit more so. I went to Chinese school on Saturdays,

but I never really spoke Mandarin in the house all the time because my dad doesn't speak. It was just something that I can recognize and sometimes answer back in when my relatives are talking about me. My mom actually also speaks Hakka. She would actually speak a lot of Haka when we were visiting her sisters, brother, and parents. But I don't speak any Hakka at all. I did take Mandarin in college, so I got good enough that I could talk to my grandma, my 婆婆. But I lost it since I just don't use it very much. Recently my mom and I have been talking every Sunday and doing a little bit of Mandarin practice. I'm trying to bring back my roots. In fact, this morning I was listening to a Mandarin tape, like a book on tape, so I'm practicing.

How does bilingualism support your organization or your work? How many languages does The Lawrence support?

Right now, we've committed to having all new exhibits be in English and Spanish, Mexican, Spanish specifically, based on our assessment of demographics. In certain spaces, we also have Chochenyo, which is the East Bay Ohlone People's language. We work with Ohlone culture bearers Vincent and Lewis through the 'ottoy Initiative. They help us translate keywords into Chochenyo to make sure that people of the East Bay get to see the first language spoken here. The Lawrence works with a Spanish translator currently, but it's been really interesting to think about translating into any other language. But there are still times when grammar doesn't always translate, or idioms, turns of phrase, or humor. Our first exhibit that we really translated into Spanish was the Future of Food exhibit. We received a lot of feedback that the translation used very formal language. So, in subsequent translations and working with a translator, we've given them more of a translation brief, like we want things to be conversational. We're realizing too now that we might even need to change the original English if there's a hard time translating into Spanish, so that the translation feels more natural for both languages. That's been really interesting to be thinking about. And we've only recognized that because other people at the Lawrence also speak Spanish. In conversation with these folks who have been able to take a look at the translations, we're trying to manage our approach going forward.

How does having a bicultural / bilingual background help you connect with the community that The Lawrence seeks to serve?

That's a great question. I think we definitely want to be able to provide different languages for folks, but it might be through a QR code or a different visitor guide in other languages. The words that you'll see in an exhibit, still maybe just English and Spanish. Words take up a lot of space, and we don't have a ton of it. It's a weird prioritization game that we're playing. If we were to add another language, the process would look at two things. One is what other languages are the most spoken in the Bay Area. Then, secondly, also thinking about reducing barriers to participation in

science. We want to give groups that have higher barriers more access to science by introducing their language.

Have you ever used your Mandarin skills as the Director of Content Strategy?

I'll be on the science center floor, and maybe there'll be a family there, and I'll notice that they're speaking Mandarin. I'll say hi to them in Mandarin, or help them in some way. I'll encourage them to do something or I'll agree with them, even though they're not asking me directly, but I understand what they're trying to work through. Because I understand more Mandarin than I can speak, I'm able to at least acknowledge the challenge that they're having trouble with. And then, it's always nice to say bye to someone in Mandarin, just acknowledging that I have this connection with you. Every once in a while someone will ask me, and I'll get to tell them that my mom is from Taiwan. That kind of thing is a nice way to connect with visitors on the science center floor.

Do The Lawrence's staff receive language training such as learning professional jargon or interpretation skills as part of their job training?

We're developing a list of all of the Chochenyo words and pronunciations to support staff in feeling more confident in being able to say words in Chochenyo or to help visitors understand what they're looking at. We don't currently have Spanish language training, but we do have staff on site that do speak Spanish. That's been really helpful for a number of reasons. One of them being understanding whether or not the translations are what we want them to be. Another one would be the connection you can make with folks in their language; in the same way that I'm able to talk with a visitor in Mandarin. People who are fluent in a certain language have it noted on their name tags, so that people can see and think "oh, I can ask that person something if I speak that language", which I think is a nice touch. I had a new facilitator who was very excited to be able to speak with a visitor in Russian, which was really neat. It is something that I think that we will be able to provide. It's just not something we do as often right now.

Does the Lawrence provide audio guides similar to those found in museums? If so, are they provided in multiple languages?

We don't currently have an audio guide. The Lawrence is less like a museum where you would go from one place to another, but we have thought about that. We have definitely also thought about having programs specifically in, for example, Spanish. But I think it's been sort of a one-off thing. We used to do story time, and every once in a while we'd have story time in Spanish. One of the other science heroes was talking about how language is sometimes seen as a barrier, but that he

sees it as a way to connect with other people. Across different languages, you have different words for the same thing, and it's a way to bring people together and be able to build on understanding through language. I thought that was really nice, and I hope that that's something that we're able to do at the Lawrence. Our visitors, who speak both English and Spanish, will hopefully be able to make connections between the two.