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History Museum head fated for new role

Posted by Kevin Lee | May 8, 2019 | Artifice | 0 | ★★★★★

Looking at the tapestry of Meg Fowler’s relatively young life, it is hard to miss the threads leading her to the History Museum of Mobile. Named as the museum’s new director this spring, long-range perspective makes that appointment look like destiny.

Born in Atlanta, Fowler’s family has deep roots in Alabama’s Black Belt. Her grandfather, Norman McCrummen, was chancellor of Perry County’s Judson College for 20 years and although her father’s job as a Presbyterian pastor took him to Atlanta, their native roots remained.

Meg’s grade school class in Atlanta was instructed to wear “team colors” to class one day. Adorned in crimson and white per her father’s instructions, she puzzled classmates.

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“They thought I had messed up Georgia’s colors,” Fowler said, laughing. “I loved Alabama before I moved here at 10 years old. For the family, it felt like a homecoming.”

Fowler easily recalled her first visit to the History Museum courtesy of her French teacher at St. Paul’s Episcopal School, Debbie Williams. It left an impression.

“I vividly remember the ironwork, an architectural element we take for granted in this city. When you see an object decontextualized in a museum space, it was like seeing it for the first time,” Fowler said.

She graduated summa cum laude from the University of Alabama, majoring in history and French. Her effortless recall of facts and philosophies during conversation exposes her Phi Beta Kappa membership.

“I did a gap year after undergraduate and taught English in France for a year through a program with the State Department, which was lots of fun,” Fowler said.

“I was in Tulane [University] for graduate studies in art history and from there I went into a Ph.D. program and am in the final stages of writing my dissertation for an interdisciplinary Ph.D. in art history and society,” Fowler said.

Fowler deftly skipped past two years she spent teaching art history at the University of South Alabama, a 2013 graduate internship at the New Orleans Museum of Art and a 2018 curatorial fellowship at Paris’ Musée d’Orsay.

“I have a lot of experience in museums and I’ve learned the power in an object. Whether it’s a painting or an artifact, a flag or a sculpture, there’s so much power in interacting with those authentic pieces that can bring to life a whole colorful world of people and smells and sights and emotions,” Fowler said.

She’s seen it at the museum by running into visitors who haven’t been in years but easily relay emotional moments triggered by artifacts or displays.

Fowler had been on the museum’s board of directors since 2017 when the directorship most recently opened. She said other board members approached her about considering the job.

“I was honored, gave it some thought and it became clear it was so well aligned with my field, interests and abilities. It was a place where I could make a contribution,” Fowler said.

So now that she’s in the top seat, what’s next? Fowler wants the museum more engaged, with the community, with the visitors. She wants to focus on developing more in-house exhibits, drawing from its stockpile of 117,000 objects. One exhibit she pegged for the end of May will utilize its collection in looking at the rapid changes of the 1960s.

“This is a real cultural history where fashion, which can seem so ephemeral and insignificant, [can show you] everything you want to know about politics and culture in that decade,” Fowler said.

She said part will be represented in photos, in vinyl records and more in artifacts gifted by an iconic downtown department store. Other pieces will be borrowed from the community.

Fowler wants to make the institution’s scope larger. She sees a vision for generations past and future.

“We tell Mobile’s stories, plural. If your great-great grandfather was from Mobile, that doesn’t mean the same thing to everyone. There are all these different stories of what it means to be from Mobile and in the history museum, we tell them all,” Fowler said.

Her philosophical slant envisions a deeper role than just a place replete with names and dates. She thinks visitors can bridge gaps by gaining empathy and compassion from their museum experiences.

“Museums are places where people get to ask the most fundamental questions. Where do I come from? Who am I? Where am I going? Those are essential questions of what it is to be a Mobilian, a Southerner, an American, a human,” Fowler said.

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