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Q&A: Mark Fitzgerald Wilson takes the helm at Zoellner Arts Center

BY ELLA MORRISSEY — ; PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 9, 2020, 6:29 PM

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The Brown and White *recently interviewed Mark Fitzgerald Wilson, the new executive director of Zoellner Arts Center.*

Q: Since you were recently appointed the executive director of Zoellner Arts Center, what have the biggest challenges been so far starting off during COVID-19?

Mark Fitzgerald Wilson: I guess one of the biggest challenges would be the fact that usually I would be able to see all the staff and people face-to-face right away. But right now, it's meeting people remotely. In the arts, we're all about making connections, and so having to learn how to do that remotely is a little bit of a challenge without that human interaction and face-to-face aspect.

Q: Can you tell me a little about your background and where you were before Lehigh?

MFW: I was the executive director of Cultural Programming and Partnerships at Ocean County College. I was in charge of the Grunin Center and the Novins Planetarium. I was also in charge of cultural programs at the college including helping with a performing arts high school that we had on our campus. Additionally, I helped with other cultural programs like the lecture series that we did and a beyond the classroom series.

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Q: Since everything has to be virtual this fall, what has Zoellner been planning in terms of virtual events?

MFW: In the very beginning of the fall, we are going to highlight faculty, staff and students. We will be doing short five-minute programs, our spotlight series, where we will spotlight the Lehigh University community. People are going to be doing some music, singing and performing instrumental pieces. We have the dean (of the College of Arts and Sciences) playing something on his guitar. We also have the chair of the theatre department doing one of her original pieces.

Q: What are you most excited about in your new role?

MFW: What excites me right now is that there are a lot of things that Zoellner Arts Center does well and the things that they are lacking are things that I excel at. I think we are able to work together with the strengths of the staff and the strengths that I have to build upon the history of the Zoellner Arts Center. The fact that working with a well-respected university is very important to me. Lehigh is one of the top 50 beautiful campuses in the country, and one of the top 50 research universities and those are things that are very exciting. With some of the programs that I want to build upon from the past, I think I'm going to be able to help run some programs that I think will connect a little deeper with the community and deeper with the campus community as a whole.

Q: What are your biggest goals for the semester in your role as executive director?

MFW: My big goal is to really understand what makes Zoellner Arts Center special. Because of the pandemic, it gives me a chance to listen to a lot of people and do a lot of strategic planning. It is hard sometimes, with the day-to-day operations, to think long term and think about what you've done successfully and what you need to do to grow. Since I'm new, I get to come here with a fresh set of eyes and so I see things a little bit differently because I haven't been a part of that day-to-day so I come here asking questions. This gives people a chance to pause and think about and reflect on the things I ask about.

Q: How do you think Zoellner will keep the Bethlehem community and those who are theatre majors actively involved and engaged in the fall semester?

MFW: With our students. Because we are able to utilize our stage, they still have that platform to share their talents. We have been able to bring in our cameras to then broadcast to the community. We are building upon this right now because obviously it is not something that we do all the time. This gives us a chance to stretch different muscles by doing these video recordings and our hope is to be able to do more of that and then learn as we grow.

Q: Although you've just recently started, what attracted you to the position and what do you think will be the most rewarding part of the job?

MFW: What attracts me to this position is that Lehigh University, like I said, is a top research university. That means that the students come with a certain background of academic rigour and I want to tap into those students and challenge them no matter what they do in college, to take those things and connect them to the arts.

For me, the arts can be the glue for all of the other disciplines. I think it can help you learn how to be creative and see the beauty in anything that you are doing. If you are a person who is an engineer and you want to create something, and if you want to create something beautiful, you need to have an artistic eye to do that. If they can come and enjoy the arts and we can open up the creative brain, that would be helpful. Also for me, the Lehigh Valley is such a beautiful place. I love the outdoors. I love hiking and I love being out in nature. Instead of me having to drive as far as I used to do before to have a nice hike, it is a quick drive now to be able to enjoy that part of nature.

Q: Was there anything else I didn't touch on that you wanted to talk about?

MFW: I am glad I am able to share these things and I look forward to getting to know the campus community more. I found success in the past because I worked with a lot of student groups. I have worked with Asian culture clubs, business societies and other folks who had clubs on campus and they wanted to stretch where they were and they connected to the arts center. My hope is that with any student who wants to dig deeper and learn more and work collaboratively with us, we want to do that.

My goal within three or four years is for students to say: I want to come to Zoellner to see a show, I want to come to Zoellner to do something on stage, I want to come to the Zoellner to give back to the community, they come to our staff and ask for help. We give them that knowledge and we work together.