Stop Asking for Permission! Leading from a Place of Making (Things Happen) Luncheon keynote by Sherry Wagner-Henry Maine International Conference on the Arts Friday, October 7, 2016

I WANT TO START BY THANKING JULIE AND THE FOLKS AT THE MAINE ARTS COMMISSION FOR GIVING ME THIS CHANCE TO TELL MY STORY ABOUT LEADERSHIP. I had been telling some folks yesterday that I felt anxious about this talk, mostly because I felt **WHY DID MY STORY MATTER?** There are **WAYYY** More interesting people here than me. Then I went to Pam's Inclusion workshop yesterday and I realized how important all our stories are—it's how we learn about each other and—maybe more importantly—it's how we learn about ourselves.

SLIDE OF ME AND BOLZ STUDENTS

I'm SWH and I wanted to talk with you guys today about my life as an artist and a leader and an aspirational super hero and I want to share some stories and ideas with you about how we all can do that, while at the same time, helping others to do that. So for the third time in two days, and by a show of hands, how many of you out there would identify as an artist? KEEP THEM UP. NOW Who out there identifies as a leader? Now how many of you would call yourself both? See how the number of hands dropped dramatically? You see, most of us see ourselves as one or the other. Maybe we need that distinction to give us purpose and focus. I would suggest to you today that you are and can be both. And the empowerment of combining the super powers that come with being an artist and a leader is ENORMOUS.

SLIDE OF ZHEN—THAT'S MY BABY BY THE WAY—HE'S MY SUPER HERO, BUT THAT'S A WHOLE OTHER STORY...

A roommate of mine told me once that as artists, hence leaders of some kind or another, we are all super heroes—meaning we all have some special gift or power that goes beyond our artistic talent. Think about what your super power is and write it down to reflect upon later. And don't be humble! You know EXACTLY WHAT YOU ARE GOOD AT! OWN IT!! I'VE BEEN TOLD MY SUPER POWER IS AS a connector and facilitator.

I had a presenter friend say to me the other day that I know how to take a glass of wine and turn it into a lifelong friendship and collaboration— and I can't think of a higher compliment! Or better description of what I think I do best.

Somehow, I SEEM TO mystically and magically know the recipe for SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION (MOST OF THE TIME)—I make it my business to know and meet everybody when I get to a new place or am exploring a new idea. I know who needs to be in the room, usually because of WHAT THEIR superpower IS, I know what needs to happen and I seem to

have the ability to help facilitate the discussions and reflections that get a whole group of people to that place.

Another super power I have and that we can ALL develop is AROUND ASKING: asking THE RIGHT questions, asking for advice (NOW I TOLD YOU NOT TO BE HUMBLE EARLIER--THIS IS WHERE YOU **SHOULD BE** HUMBLE AND EMPLOY HUMILITY, asking to be part of the discussion or part of the solution,

THINGS. You've been given a charge to do the thing you do best, and as soon as you devalue your superpower by suggesting that it might not be needed--you give others permission to devalue you or to simply not include you. THEY NEED YOU. THEY KNOW THEY NEED YOU. DON'T GIVE THEM A CHANCE TO DECIDE OTHERWISE.

SLIDE: OLD PICTURE OF ME

SO HOW DID I COME BY THESE POWERS? I grew up on a farm in Central Illinois. My hometown was a population of 800 people and my high school had just over 200 kids. My parents had not had the opportunity to attend college and had little exposure to the arts outside of records, and later, television and other mainstream forms of culture that didn't cost a lot—even movies were a rarity—forget a trip to the symphony or an art museum—the closest of which was over two hours away in the very scary city of Chicago. I didn't see my first play until I was in college. Now, all that in and of itself is not very remarkable or unusual, particularly in Rural America, but the amazing part of my early exposure to the arts was the fact that somehow my parents, and other parents in the community seemed to instinctively understand how important it was for their kids to have the arts in their lives, and they were going to do anything they could to make sure we had it. My parents went without little extras so that my sister and I could take dance lessons. They insisted that I play an instrument and sing in the choir. Living a Musical Life became the super power in my tiny high school of 200 kids as 150 of us played in the band and 180 of us performed in the choir. We had the MOST AMAZING teachers—and these parents, who had no access –and maybe because they had no access— made damn sure we were going to have music in our lives.

So what am I going to do with this gift?

I went to college at a small, liberal arts public university in the state of Ilinois, not a major leap from a town of 800, but the campus was about 20,000 students and the town about 100,000, so it was enough of a challenge figuring out how to fit in. I had the **BRILLIANT IDEA** that I would be a double major in music and business--Remember those parents that were so adamant about music in my life, WELL, they also wanted to make sure I could make a living and a life when I graduated—it scared them that I would be a music major, **so I added business to the pile, thinking, why not? How hard can that be?**

Impossible, is how it was. Two of the most time-consuming, all-consuming majors, so I was sucking at both of them. And I had this feeling that I should be doing something that would

help me learn how to support the work of artists—instead of being a performer myself—but it was 1984 and I had no idea what that looked like.

SLIDE OF CREATIVE ARTS ENSEMBLE

Arts Administration was still a relatively new idea—there were a handful of programs, all in big scary cities, so this was my alternative. And I was miserable. I had no PEOPLE because I had one foot in both worlds and no way to connect them. Then one night—I was wondering through the music building—wondering what I would do if I dropped out of school— and I heard the strains of Motown coming out of a rehearsal hall. I tried the door, and it was locked. So, I did what any desperate 17 year-old who is trying to figure out their life would do---I sat outside the door and waited for someone to come out. I waited for three hours. So maybe tenacity is another super power I possess?

I'm convinced what happened next changed my life and started me on the path I ended up on—it was a black music class called the Creative Arts Ensemble. Their mission: to take a different genre of music each year, work up a show/a set, cut an album (back in the days when we CUT albums)-and book the group around the state in order to learn the music business AND to perform and make money in order to attend a national music business conference—usually in NY, LA, Nashville, Atlanta, Chicago—you get the idea.

I volunteered to be their publicity and booking agent. I took and passed the state test to become a licensed and bonded talent agent (in fact, I had to wait until my 18th birthday to take it) I took PR and marketing classes so I could do press releases, design posters, I studied how to initiate contracts by interning with a talent agent in a neighboring town. Hell, I even ran lights and sound because I wanted to travel with the band and understand better the artist/audience dynamic. Didn't know what to call it, but that's what I was doing. Professor Frank Suggs changed my life forever by helping me get what I wanted by helping others get what they needed. And I never had to ask permission to do any of it—just advice on the path for getting there.

SLIDE OF CREATED EMAIL SIGNATURE

I love the Robert Frost poem, The Road Less Traveled, and it kinda became my mantra. My email signature for the longest time (back when email signatures were cool) was "Two roads diverged in a wood, but I, I took the one less traveled by. What the hell was I thinking? RF and SW (slide) I can't think of a single thing I'd ever done before that moment that was as impactful or life changing as that transformative moment. I created a new major, I became a campus leader in the arts (mostly to find others like me to play with) and I finally realized the impact and importance of the arts in my life. It was not to perform—it was to help others do their important work and to educate folks on how they could do the same.

SLIDE ASK FOR FORGIVENESS

So I guess I'd say the most satisfying part of my career as an arts educator and leader and lifelong student has come to me when I've given myself permission to **NOT ASK** others for permission. I took over the directorship of the Bolz Center and immediately identified some

challenges that needed addressing. I didn't ask anyone at the higher levels of the Dean's office if we could do these things—start new classes, get rid of old ones, hire some folks. In some instances, I laid out a plan for change and simply sold it (ie, this is what we need to do, this is what we are going to do.)

In other situations, I just did it, and leveraged comments and suggestions that others had made as the catalyst for making the change. (ie, well you had this great idea that we should do x, so I just made it happen—isn't that what you hired me to do?) Now, as I watch the self-declared leaders in the room arch their eyebrows at me, I need to be clear—this is not about going rogue! You are still collaborating, you are still working together with others to build trust, investment, and a shared vision. The difference is in the together part. I by no means intend to imply or state that you are doing this alone. You are just building such a network of support and investment, that in essence, asking for permission in most cases, becomes unnecessary.

Some may call this leading from the middle, but every time I hear that term, I want to ask, what does that really mean? I think it means leading without any real authority—which scares the bejesus out of most of us—and leading without authority is just another way of saying "getting it done without always asking if this is the way we do it." The way I see it, they need US more than we need them—because we're superheroes, remember—so we should just remain confident and do the job they have hired us to do.

Ok, besides having superpowers, at the end of the day I'm also an educator—so this talk has to have some learning outcomes for the audience;

SLIDE OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

SO IF YOU TAKE ANYTHING AWAY WITH YOU TODAY, I HOPE IT'S ONE OR ALL OF THESE FOLLOWING THINGS:

#1--Don't always try to be the smartest person in the room—COME ON, AS VU LE often says in his now infamous **blogpost** *Nonprofits with Balls*, We're UNICORNS--smart, attractive mystical people—so it's bound to happen **THAT WE ARE THE SMARTEST PEOPLE IN THE ROOM**, but folks who try too hard to show off everything and everyone they know only provoke animosity and rolling eyeballs and this misses the very opportunities they were looking to make happen. Why? Because Know-It-All Unicorns and Super heroes very rarely attract those **unicorns and superheroes smarter than them that they NEED to make things happen.**

I wanted to share a quick story that illustrated this point for me early on—I began my tenure as director of the Bolz Center in August of 2012 and in that summer interview process, the dean of the Business School asked me lots of questions about budgets and strategy—things one might expect the Dean to ask or be concerned with, but one question stood out as almost odd in its juxtaposition with the other questions. "There are three human virtues that I've been reading about and thinking about within the context of higher education—there 's Truth—SLIDE

sifting and winnowing as we might refer to it at Wisconsin—SLIDE

Goodness, well this, of course, is the Wisconsin Idea. What's missing?

SLIDE -WHAT ABOUT BEAUTY

I had not read Howard Gardner's book, **Truth, Beauty and Goodness, Reframed**, something that became **REQUIRED** reading for some of us in the B-School over the next several months as Francois presented me with a copy shortly after being hired. But fortunately, our associate dean and faculty director of Bolz had coached me before entering the Dean's office and **Beauty** was at the tip of my tongue. But in those first few moments, I honestly wasn't certain why this idea could be so important in the Wisconsin School of Business. I mean, I been hired to marry arts and business, not beauty and business? Who would understand this CONCEPT OF BEAUTY and how could it make a difference? This is clearly not what I wanted to do BECAUSE I DIDN'T REALIZE YET THIS WAS WHAT I **NEEDED** TO DO IN ORDER FOR US BOTH TO GET WHAT WE WANTED.

Flash forward to the following Fall-we've read the book, talked about it and discussed it with our arts and creative colleagues across campus, our advisory board, our alumni—WE HAVE SERVED UP AND DRUNK the Koolaid—so to speak—and the Dean had given Bolz the opportunity to hire a visiting professor. I wanted someone who could bring perspective to the work we were doing, which is at the intersection of arts and business. I had heard Diane Ragsdale speak at a Wallace Foundation National Arts Exchange event in Minneapolis and I was convinced she was the person we wanted to bring in to talk about the sustainability of the arts movement specifically WITHIN regional theatre, something that was core to her research and dissertation work at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. But when I called her, and we talked about the possibilities—she said, and I still remember this, "I have this crazy idea. Do you know who Howard Gardner is?"

SLIDE OF DIANE CLASS PICTURE/JUST MERCY PROJECT

Lots of things have happened since that initial conversation and Diane's appointment as the first artist/scholar in residence at the Wisconsin School of Business. Other partners and colleagues joined us in this exploration. The BBA program, through its COMPASS Leadership development program, becomes interested and committed to exploring aesthetics in business (WHICH IS WHAT WE ENDED UP CALLING THE PROGRAM) as part of their core learning outcomes. Bolz Center ALUMNI worked with campus leaders, and artists/creatives across campus to help design and implement some students' first encounters with curated/designed aesthetic learning and reflective experiences—IN ESSENCE, WE WERE AND STILL ARE ENGAGING WITH STEAM-based strategies for learning. We produced and hosted a Beauty Symposium that included Diane and John Michael Schert—who many of you know or have met at this conference--And Diane's class, *Approaching Beauty* became the first fully-designed and coordinated effort to give real, dedicated space, time, and scholarly pursuit to the ideas AROUND HOW ARTS AND LEADERSHIP ARE MARRIED. And the work continues—last year, our new artist-in-residence, Angela Richardson, had students engage with Bryan Stevenson's book

Just Mercy, while they explored issues of social injustice, empathy, perspective-taking and how art could be used as a tool to tell a story differently.

THIS LEADS ME TO MY SECOND LEARNING OUTCOME AND TAKE-AWAY OF THE DAY: NO SLIDE CHANGE

1) Recognize and maximize NOT being the smartest person in the room. Ask others to help you Make Something Happen--This is exactly what we did with Diane and John Michael. They may be the one you need with the resources, the contacts, the know-how or simply the better idea. I've got a couple of examples I want to share with you:

SLIDE OF MN LEGACY STUFF

How many of you have heard of the LEGACY ADMENDMENT in the great state of Minnesota? If you're involved in the arts and curious to know what your state's per capita spending on the arts is in your own state, you might be surprised to learn that Minnesota is ranked #1 in their spending, and not by a small margin. At last look MN was spending \$7.08 to Delaware's #2 spending rate of just \$3.50 per person. Maine—you're at .67¢--but if you think that's bad, consider Wisconsin, MNs next door neighbor, at just .14¢ per person.

SLIDE-four quads

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN? Well, Minnesota Citizens for the Arts had been lobbying for years to get a dedicated portion of the state sales tax to be allocated to the arts and culture. But they could never get enough support for the bill, despite the State's historical love affair and support of the arts. At the same time, there were two other groups trying to make a similar go at a dedicated allocation—land conservationists and the clean water folks. What happened next is simply incredible. Instead of working at cross purposes—trying to get everyone to vote for their one cause—ALL the causes got together and merged one comprehensive bill—the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment, or as it became more easily known, the Legacy Amendment.

SLIDE

While I'm grossly oversimplifying the process for time, four distinct affinity groups—arts and culture, history and park advocates, hunter/conservationists and anglers for clean water—got together and wrote a bill that no one could refuse—on at least one count. If you didn't love the arts, surely you couldn't argue with clean water? If you didn't like hunting and fishing, surely you could appreciate and support land conservation. It was a brilliant strategy and perfect example of getting what you want, by helping someone else get theirs. But it meant people had to talk to each other—to groups they had never had anything in common with before—and therein lies the answer.

SLIDE OF TWO ORANGES

This particularly moment in history reminds me of a story that someone one told me in a business class. Two businesses need all the oranges they can find. So they start competing with each other to buy up all the oranges, which meant someone was going to go out of business. Finally, one day, the two business owners are brought together

and asked what they WANT—and they both say ORANGES. But when asked what they NEED, one says, well I need the juice to make Orange Juice and concentrate. And the other replies Well, I need the peels to make zest, scented products, tea and candy. So it bears repeating that the best way to get what you want is to make sure you can help somewhat else get what they need in the process.

SLIDE OF GROUP PHOTO

So for me, leadership that helps me get what I want by helping others get what they need goes beyond basic collaboration--it is often about finding the right teammates (or ensemble if we going to borrow from the artistic metaphor). I don't know about you, but the leadership I'm **most proud** of was when I worked with my much smarter, more experienced team to make something happen by simply passing the ball and pushing barriers out of the way so we could all be good partners in doing great work, together. EVERYBODY WINS, AND MORE IMPORTANTLY, EVERYONE FEELS RESPONSIBLE FOR MAKING IT HAPPEN.

SLIDE

And finally, Number #3--you know that saying, Don't ask for permission, simply ask forgiveness? I don't know if that's always the right alternative answer (although it's worked well for me over the years, particularly when I'm the newbie in the room.) But What you should always ask for is advice or assistance. By the time you get to the forgiveness stage, folks will have forgotten that you didn't ask—they'll just remember that it was a good idea they were a part of making happen.

SLIDE BOARD CLASS

A great example of this for me is the creation of a nonprofit board leadership class. So here's the reader's digest version: I wanted my Arts Administration MBAs to have the chance to serve on a nonprofit board before they graduated and eventually either served on a board with no experience or found themselves running an organization with a nonprofit board—and no experience at that either. But 20 somethings don't typically get those opportunities. And while Millenials really understand the premise of not asking for permission and "make your own opportunity"--Orgs don't see them as having the experience or the financial resources to be valuable. But my colleagues and I creating the class thought—there has to be something those nonprofit orgs want—so we listened and we found it—youthful perspective, enthusiasm, diversity of thought, age, class, gender, ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic experiences—we had hit the motherload.

With Board Source (a membership organization that does research and trains people how to work with and on boards) having just come out with their latest report that the average board in this country is made up of primarily white males over the age of 60—we had just stumbled upon the orange peel that organizations didn't know they were missing. And the cherry on top? In post-mortem interviews, executive directors told us that the really unexpected HAPPY

ACCIDENT that most often occurred? Was that their boards became more engaged than they had been in years—because they were modeling best practices for the students in the room.

SLIDE

So—to recap—you're an artist and you are a leader. But, let's face it, we didn't wake up one morning happening to be either—we had to work at it. And some of us had to work at it harder than others. SO...How do leaders become leaders? Some think it's because they like to organize things and people, or solve problems. Others say it's because leaders are inspirational and have a vision that they inspire others to follow. I SAY THE BEST LEADERS, THE TRUE LEADERS ARE THE ONES THAT MAKE SOMETHING HAPPEN, NOT BECAUSE SOMEONE TOLD THEM THEY COULD, BUT BECAUSE NO ONE TOLD THEM THEY COULDN'T.

SLIDE OF ALAN FROM BATES WEBSITE

I have one more story to share. SO, DR. ALAN CARR, faculty member over at Bates College and former student of mine, is not here today—he's out of town, so this gives me a great opportunity to talk about him.

Alan, did his DMA degree at UW-Madison, which I think you all know, is where the Bolz Center for Arts Administration and I'm from. When I came to Madison I was struck by the fact that there were a number of graduate arts majors who were getting a lot of time and focus on the refinement of their craft or performance ability, and sometimes even a little bit of education-training, but very rarely were there discussions taking place in their home departments **about how to make a living and a life as an artist.** The assumption is you will win a seat in a major symphony orchestra, a resident theatre company, dance company, get invited to put up a show at a prestigious museum or gallery or become the next best likeness of your major professor—but how many of those opportunities are out there?

Hundreds, which sounds great until you realize we are training hundreds of thousands of artists every year. And the training is fantastic! But I posit that many of us in higher ed are setting our artists up for failure, because we are not teaching them or more importantly, **empowering them** to find other ways to lead or innovate.

SLIDE-classroom

So we decided to open up the Bolz Center training in two ways: We began offering arts entrepreneurship classes in the Business School to students of all stripes: artists, computer scientists, environmentalists, engineers—but mostly wenwanted those artists to come in and have a path for thinking about other ways to be **successful artists AND business people**. Because we also thought we knew that **if** artists and business students filled a classroom together, the peer-to-peer exchange of learning and knowing would be a little-bit mind-blowing. And I think we were right. The second thing we did was we opened up the MBA arts administration courses that I was teaching, and have mostly had the School of Music DMA candidates taking us up on this. Alan Carr was the first.

Now, Professor Carr's a crafty one. He had already been thinking about his life as an artist—both as a musician and as a professor, and he wanted more. He told me one day: AND I'M PARAPHRASING HERE: I WANT TO UNDERSTAND THE BUSINESS OF THE ARTS. I'M ALREADY A TEACHER (he was giving lessons at a local college) and I'm an artist playing in loads of ensembles or soloing. But I can also be a business person, who figures out ways to to turn my expertise into more marketable opportunities. **And he did.**

SLIDE

Because artists solve problems. And while we don't always know what the question is, Alan had identified a couple of challenges and had determined where the opportunities lie. SLIDE OF RECORDING EQUIPMENT

Challenge #1 Before I even met Alan, he he had encountered challenges **with recording** at the School. The DMAs often have to make a recording of their compositions or their performances and the as is often the case at the world's leading educational institutions, where cutting edge technology is created every day, the equipment in the music school was crap. So Alan saw an opportunity: he borrowed money and he invested in some high quality recording equipment—microphones, mixing board/console, playback and recording equipment. And he became the School of Music's number one source for getting a quality recording done for both students and faculty, by the way, and he became the School's #1 competitor.

I mean, they were making money off these students, and because they couldn't find any better, they made do with what they had. Not Alan. Now, what's even more interesting about this story than him coming up with this business idea and setting it into motion, was that once the faculty realized that what he was producing at a far higher quality than what they had originally been offering, the faculty started using his services. And helping to promote their "in house" recording service, putting their own service out of business. So did it succeed because it was simply a good idea? Or because Alan came up with a solution to a problem and offered it up—not only as a way to get his own recordings done well (what he needed) but as a way to help others make a better product as well. (by helping them get what they need.)

SLIDE

So I told you that Alan had identified a couple of challenges that he turned into opportunities. I believe the second one is part of the reason that he is here in Maine at Bates College. Alan knew that getting a DMA from a prestigious music school would get him the interview in lots of cases, but how would that distinguish him from all the other great players and teachers out there? REMEMBER, HUNDREDS OF JOBS, HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF GRADS.) AND HOW MANY UNIVERSITIES WHERE LOOKING FOR BASS TROMBONE PROFESSORS IN 2015? I don't think you need your whole right hand to do the math. So what did he do to increase the odds? He worked with his advisor and me to develop a doctoral minor in arts administration. Our thinking was to bring a yet another value-add to an already impressive resume.

Here's a professor that is is an impeccable musician, teacher and now entrepreneur, but in addition, he was going to get training and the opportunity to apply practice in developing

programming, budgets, marketing strategies, development and fundraising strategies, program evaluation. NOW you have a candidate that can teach, do research, AND be a team player in developing a concert series, the accompanying budgets, have perspectives on marketing a season, writing grants and funding proposals. By helping others produce what they need to do, Alan gets to do what **he wants to do AND LOVES to do**. Dr. Alan Carr directs the applied music program and manages the Dean of Faculty Concert Series here at Bates College.

SLIDE

Find a way to do what you want to do by helping someone else do what they need to do. Or, get yours by helping someone else get theirs.

•

SLIDE OF A FARM KID

So remember that farm kid back at Illinois State University? When I flash forward 25 years I start seeing a pattern emerge: When I stopped asking people *if I could do something*, and instead asked *people if I could help them do something*, I discovered the secret of effective leadership isn't about authority and hierarchy, but awareness, mentorship, influence and making a place where art and collaboration win the day.

And at the end of the day, this talk may be less about always being a leader and more about being a follower—OR AS WE OFTEN REFER TO IT IN OUR INDUSTRY, BEING A COLLABORATOR. Or maybe it's about deciding when leading OR following is SIMPLY THE best choice for getting what you want. The point being, if you see something TRANSFORMATIVE happening, and you are inspired by a visionary who represents every way you feel and do about this fantastic happening and you want to be a part of it with all your being, then find a way to be at the table—make it happen—find a way to be a part of it.

SLIDE OF ZHEN

OFFER UP YOUR SUPER POWER.

NOW...when you sit outside someone's office or classroom for three hours, some people may call you a stalker. But I say, if you simply can't be the leader (or it doesn't make sense for you to be) then be a deliberate and intentional and collaborative stalker, I mean follower. People are generally flattered that you've noticed and appreciate what they're doing to impact their small part of the world. And I've never had anyone tell me they don't want **my help** to make something amazing happen.

SLIDE OF TOILET/DOOR—WOMEN'S SUPERHERO IMAGE

SO..TO SUM UP –and being **painfully** aware that I am now the only thing standing in your way before the bathroom break and the next session--IF you are inspired to make something happen—something fantastic and impactful that no one else is doing, or seeing or making—then don't ask for permission. You are artists and community leaders—and in order for others to believe that, you have to believe it yourself. I have a friend that always uses the turn of phrase "If you're not at the table, you're on the table." You know, I think this goes back to that whole, **Fake It til You Make IT** idea —or in education we call it the **IMPOSTER SYNDROME** (oh

my god, when are these students going to realize that I have absolutely **no idea** what I'm talking about!)—thing is, you don't have to fake it, you know it. And you just need to believe it and get others to believe it as well.-- So **PULL OUT THAT CAPE**—fire up that network of yours and either join your super power with another great super hero out there **OR inspire someone to help YOU get what you want, so they can get THEIRS too.**

I thank you for your time and attention.