Q&A with Chevy Humphrey
Interviewed by Joelle Seligson

How can a child follow the paths of a musically inclined mother and a science-oriented father? Chevy Humphrey, president and CEO of the Arizona Science Center in Phoenix, managed to do both. She worked with the Houston and Phoenix symphonies before beginning at the science center 15 years ago. Along with her parents, Humphrey credits mentors with helping her find career success—and she pledges to pay it forward. Here, she shares advice for aspiring museum administrators, and reveals where she plans to guide ASTC when she begins her term as the new board chair at the 2013 ASTC Annual Conference in October.

Chevy, let me get some background first. How did you wind up going down the science and science museum path?

You know, it’s—I think it was fate because my dad is a biologist and my mother was a music teacher, and I started off my career in science in college but then I got my first job at the Houston Symphony so I had the left brain/right brain working. My mom was excited for me because she’s a music teacher and I was getting into the arts and I was starting my nonprofit career in the arts. And then things took a turn and I had an opportunity to come and work at the Arizona Science Center, and my dad said, “Well, it’s about time!” So I came over from the Phoenix Symphony, and I was recruited to work at the science center by [former president and CEO] Sheila Grinell and absolutely fell in love with science communication, science learning, and although I’ve always had that in my blood, it was refreshing that I could have the creativity and the art side as well as understanding the scientific side as well. So to me, I’ve made both my parents happy.

What position did you start in at the science center?

Oh my goodness, I’ve been at the Arizona Science Center for 15 years; I’ve had six different positions. I started out as the director of development. My expertise in the nonprofit field has been in marketing and fundraising, specifically more in fundraising. In my first interview with Sheila, she said, “Where do you see yourself in five years?” and I sat in the chair and I said, “Well, your job.” And she was like, “All righty then, you’re hired!” and from there we made a deal. She said that she would train me to become the next CEO of wherever I decided to go and then she decided to retire and she said, “I want you to have my job.”

Sounds like that was a good answer.

I’ve been really blessed with a lot of great opportunities and a lot of people stepping in as mentors in my career and I’ve utilized and leveraged those relationships to realize my full potential in my career and especially in the nonprofit management sector.
Are there any other mentors or role models that come to mind?

My father. My father was a first-generation college graduate. He came from a family of 12 and he put his dreams aside of becoming a physician so that he could put his youngest sister through college and his niece through college because he felt that a college education would be transformational to their lives. And so—and it did, the young women, my cousin and my aunt, it did transform their lives, and they’re doing very well and now all their children have college degrees. So my father saw a bigger vision than his own, so that taught me a lot about paying it forward and making sure that although I had wonderful mentors in my life, I’m always—it is my responsibility to mentor and help others.

In that vein, what advice do you give to people who are now looking to have your job someday?

You know I actually have a—my three things that I stay true to is treating others the way I would want to be treated, doing the best job you possibly can do, and always making the right decision no matter what. So I stick to those three basic mantras and I live by it. And I always tell people, you know, put yourself in someone else’s shoes and realize—try to realize what they’re going through and help them, because helping people and helping others—you gain so much more by doing that than keeping it all to yourself.

In terms of coming aboard at ASTC, which I know will happen at the annual conference in October—where would you like to guide ASTC over the next two years?

Wow. That’s a longer conversation.

Any specific goals?

I think a specific goal is how can ASTC be a game changer in support of building our field, building the people within our field? I think the people make the field. How can ASTC provide the services to make the people stronger so our industry will thrive? I think we have a lot of great organizations but ASTC I feel needs to provide stronger professional development resources and tools to help the people become stronger so that we have a better industry. I think professional development’s huge. But it’s—we’re in such a transitional state—there’s no “how it used to be”; we’re creating that new normal, we’re creating that new trajectory and the future, but the people are creating that and we’ve got to be on top of it, and our staff needs the proper resources and tools to lead us into that next phase of science centers.

Sounds like a good objective. Is there anything that I haven’t touched on that you want to add?

It’s funny, when you said what do I tell most kids—I tell them my three mottos but a lot of these new kids when they come in to work for us they’re budding physicists,
they’re budding neuroscientists, and they just want to conquer the world. And the really neat thing that I always tell them is you need to be afraid, be very, very afraid. I say a little fear helps with the confidence that comes with it. And so I tell them to dream big, be extravagant and dream unrealistic dreams because that’s how we create new technologies and new innovations and go new directions. And then I tell them to seek out uncomfortable situations, by being uncomfortable—that means you’re growing, it’s almost like being sick to your stomach, like you’ve got airsickness. And then I say slow down and grab life by the horns and smell the roses. So—and they all look at me and they’re like, “Well, those are so contradictory,” and I’m like, “Yeah, exactly!” It makes you think, it makes you grow, it helps you to expand your thinking. And if you think about it, what we’re trying to teach those young people are the same things we’re trying to do in our institutions, and those people make our institutions and that’s our community.