Q&A with Maya Ajmera

Interviewed by Susan Straight

This is Susan Straight, editor of Dimensions magazine and I’m here today with Maya Ajmera. Maya is the president and CEO of Society for Science & the Public and publisher of Science News. The Society is best known for its world-class science education competitions and award-winning journalism. Just after graduating from college, Maya founded The Global Fund for Children, a philanthropy dedicated to improving the lives of vulnerable children. Maya has written more than 20 children’s books.

Maya, it’s so great to be with you today.

It’s really great to be with you, Susan. Thanks so much for having me.

Your career direction was partly inspired by seeing a small group of children attending class on a train platform in India. What kind of innovative approaches to education are you seeing now, during lockdowns and social distancing?

Everything has gone virtual. You’re seeing a lot of innovative things going on around the world. One place that a lot of kids have homed in on is Khan Academy. I’ll be honest, my daughter loves the reinforcement that it gives. She loves the sparkling balloons she gets when she adds two plus two equals four and she’s right about it. It keeps giving her motivation. I’m incredibly excited about how technology has become very creative during this time. I’ll also say very honestly, it doesn’t take the place of being in a classroom and learning from a teacher. Even though we’re doing that virtually, it isn’t the same as being there in person. Let’s hope our extraordinary scientists out there in pharmaceutical companies, the NIH and everywhere else are coming up with the therapeutics and vaccines we need to fight COVID-19.

What are some of the most important things science centers and museums do (and could also do) to address social inequities?

One of the things I learned at The Global Fund for Children is that you meet children where they are instead of them coming to you. Science centers and museums can have a way of reaching children by going into the communities in a safe way. There’s a great example of one of our STEM Action Grant recipients, BioBus in New York City. It’s an old bus equipped with science equipment and it goes into the neighborhoods and children come on the bus and do science experiments and learn from the scientists about research and doing science projects. To me, it’s about meeting children where they are—can science centers and museums do more of that? We have some extraordinary virtual experiences. At the Regeneron International Science and Engineering Fair this year, we had the opportunity to go virtual. We did the STEM Experiential Hall where we had 30 extraordinary museums and centers from this country and around the world participate; they offered some amazing virtual experiences. We had more than 18,000 registrants at virtual ISEF this year and a huge intake into that number was the STEM Experiential Hall.
What opportunities and challenges do a global pandemic present for the Society’s work?
There are two things that we do. One is our world class science competitions as well as our outreach and equity work. All of those programs have been built on us being together. The International Science and Engineering Fair, that was supposed to happen in May, brings together 10,000 people and high school students—2,000 of them from 80 countries and territories—and we couldn’t do that this year. They compete for over $5 million in awards. We had to go virtual, but we turned it on its head: we brought over 18,000 people together in a virtual setting. We like to bring people together because kids love to talk about their science; they love to talk about their research. And that’s incredibly important.

I’m also the Publisher of Science News (the magazine founded by E.W. Scripps nearly 100 years ago) and our newsroom has been working 24/7 on COVID-19 reporting as well as other science reporting. We’ve seen our digital numbers go through the roof due to the hunger there is for evidence-based science reporting right now.

What hopeful progress do you see for achieving greater social justice in stem education as well as broadening science participation?
One of the things that was very important to me when I came to the Society for Science & the Public in 2014 was that every young person in this country could dream about becoming a scientist or engineer, if that’s what they wanted to be. And if every kid had that opportunity, then the Society for Science & the Public needed to make sure we created programs that gave those kids the opportunities to get there. So, we’ve created several programs in the social justice space where we get young people of color really interested in science and engineering. Science News in High Schools is in 5,000 high schools in the country—over 60% of them are Title I schools—reaching nearly 5 million kids. We have a mentorship program called the Advocate Program, where we support teachers and mentors who create a posse of students that are underserved, who are already doing research but they haven’t competed. So how do these mentors actually help support these young people in the science competition process? And we have a grants program that’s very dynamic to help support nonprofit organizations—like the BioBus that I talked about—innovative nonprofits run by extraordinary social entrepreneurs on the ground serving underserved kids. I can go on with our work with our teachers across the country too. But we’ve got to do more because living in a global economy and knowing the incredible issues that are facing us from climate change to the pandemic to another pandemic in 10 or 15 or 30 years—we have to have a workforce that’s prepared for the future. And that workforce is going to look very different than it does today because of the extraordinary diversity in this country. Diversity makes us strong; we just have to do our part to make sure that STEM education is strong in this country.

In what ways do students participating in the Society’s competitions engage the broader public in science?
We have three competitions: the premier middle school competition called Broadcom MASTERS, the oldest high school science competition called the Science Talent Search, which used to be called Westinghouse Science Talent Search, but is now called Regeneron Science
Talent Search. And then we have the International Science and Engineering Fair, sponsored by Regeneron as well. In all of these places, kids have to be able to talk about their science projects and defend their work. And that is an important skill that kids need to learn. When you’ve done a science project, presenting it to the public, presenting it to a layperson walking down the street so they can understand how this has implications in our greater society—that’s an important life skill, frankly, for these young scientists and engineers.

What are you currently working on—or what’s your next big project?
Our next big project is the Regeneron Science Talent Search—we’re going virtual. We were planning to do this in person in March, but COVID happened, so now we’re taking the most prestigious STEM competition in the country—and possibly even the world—for high school students and it will be virtual and there will be a public exhibition of projects on Saturday, July 25. It is open to the public as is the awards ceremony so we can have a large number of people be part of this. Go to www.societyforscience.org for more information.

Thank you so much for talking with us today, Maya. I really appreciate it.

Thank you.