Makeeba McCreary is leaving the MFA to run New Commonwealth fund and will adopt a ‘start up’ approach

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Updated August 8, 2021

Makeeba McCreary posed for a portrait at the Museum of Fine Arts.

CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

The New Commonwealth Racial Equity and Social Justice Fund has appointed its first president, Makeeba McCreary, who will be leaving the Museum of Fine Arts to take the reins of the nonprofit in September.
McCreary, 49, joined the MFA in January 2019 as its first chief of learning and community engagement to help attract a diverse audience. She championed Black artists and worked closely with MFA curators to incorporate community voices into exhibitions and galleries, as well as to create curatorial opportunities for local students of color.

Prior to the MFA, McCreary spent much of her career in education, as an administrator for Boston Public Schools, and as a nonprofit executive managing philanthropic investment in public schools for Jordan Brand, a division of Nike.

The New Commonwealth fund was launched in June 2020 by 19 Black and brown executives in Boston amid a racial reckoning that followed the murder of George Floyd. They wanted to reshape corporate philanthropy with a focus on supporting nonprofits with Black and brown leaders. The group has already raised $30 million and given out about $3 million to organizations across the state fighting systemic racism and disparities in education, health care, the economy, and criminal justice.

Here’s an edited transcript of our conversation:

Q. You haven’t been at the MFA for very long. So why go to the New Commonwealth fund now?

A. I didn’t anticipate leaving this soon, but in part because of what has transpired I have become very intent on how I spend my time, and feel the urgency that comes from acknowledging Black and brown leadership, and focusing my energy on supporting that leadership to get both our city and the Commonwealth to a place of not just healing, but really thriving.

Q. Take us back to when you first learned about the New Commonwealth fund. What was your reaction?

A. I was so proud. I remember reading the article and thinking, ‘Right on. That’s exactly the courage that inspires.’ It’s 19 executives who have their own careers. They have their own 70-hour-a-week management challenges in their own institutions, probably also dealing with a lot of equity, diversity, inclusion questions in their own personal career pathways. And yet they all came together
and said, ‘We’re going to leverage our individual power, leadership and that of our institutions, to create something bigger than us.’

Q. We have a lot of corporate philanthropy in Massachusetts. Then we have Barr Foundation, a generous grantor, and Boston Foundation, which has a new leader in Lee Pelton, who wants to put equity at the center of that institution’s work. How will NCF distinguish itself?

A. I don’t see NCF being in competition. There’s something very complementary about an NCF model that pairs well with the Barr Foundation and/or the Boston Foundation who approach their grant making with an incredible amount of integrity. There’s room for everybody at the table, but in particular, I think NCF probably has the ability to be the most nimble.

Q. So you’ll kind of take a start-up culture approach?

A. This is a start up. Not kind of. That’s the other thing that I’m really excited about. I’ve built my own company before, but having the opportunity to work with folks like Damian Wilmot, Myechia Minter-Jordan, Corey Thomas — all 19 of them. They all have innovated in their own industries in ways that I don’t think we talk about enough.

Q. One of the hallmarks of NCF is that it raised a lot of money quickly, but also gave it away quickly. Will you maintain that pace?

A. What the New Commonwealth fund did was they reminded us that this is not an activation in the wake of the murder of another Black man. This is an activation in the wake of decades of disrepair in our communities. I anticipate that we keep our foot on the gas pedal.

Q. During a visit to the MFA in May 2019, Black middle school students from Boston were targeted by security in a racial profiling incident. The museum pledged to be more inclusive. Is it?
A. That incident helped this museum understand that it is absolutely at the center of the community, that it is a responsible player in the city of Boston’s citizenship. When people walk over the threshold, they are very clear what we expect from all of our visitors. We expect that people are treated respectfully, that we are inclusive of every race, gender, orientation, religion, and that somebody who doesn’t come through the doors with that same sentiment, frankly, this is not the right place for them to be.

I believe there’s been progress, but there’s still a lot more to do to get to a place where that feeling of inclusion is palpable.

Q. What more needs to be done to make the MFA more welcoming?

A. There needs to be a strong effort to diversify the staff. There could be some challenging done at any institution, but in particular, talking about the museum, to say: What kind of pedigree does somebody need to have to do a certain job? How many years do they have to really have? Are there transferable skills from other industries that would allow somebody to be hugely successful?

A lot of people don’t even think they could work at a museum. If the museum could tackle that, then when you walk in, you see the diversity that reflects the city of Boston racially, just the visual diversity of different shades of brown, and you hear different languages being spoken by somebody with a badge on. That would provide the level of exhale that we underestimate the value of.

Q. When you look ahead five years from now, what do you want NCF’s biggest impact to be?

A. The intention here is to end systemic racism. I have a 16-year-old-son, a brown boy who deserves to be able to adult into a society, or at least a Commonwealth, where there’s some breathing room between the bouts of racism that he would otherwise encounter.
I’m motivated for more than just him. I would like people to be able to say that we’ve moved that needle — when it starts to shift the infrastructure of where decisions are made, who gets to be at the table, who gets access to the next level of information that allows them to really participate in our civic community.

When I was at the city, Rahn Dorsey and I worked together closely. One thing that we constantly circled on was this idea that every Boston Public Schools graduate should be walking into a community where they had full authority to walk into any door, sit at any table, insert themselves into any conversation.

White kids from Wellesley sit at the dinner table every night and their parents infuse this notion that they have the right to be anywhere that they want. That’s a really good thing. I want all of our Black and brown and white kids in Boston, in New Bedford, in Brockton, in Springfield — I want them all to have that same level of privilege.

Q. Where are we in achieving racial equity? Are we at a crossroads, or have a long way to go?

A. We can be a strong model for the rest of the country. If we can hold ourselves accountable for not letting this conversation die down when media is no longer talking about George Floyd or Breonna Taylor, or any number of travesties that continue to take place as an attack on Black and brown lives. When we can keep that conversation present and energized and on the streets without a national spotlight, then we have the shot at ending systemic racism.

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