

On Life and Meaning

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Episode 58 – Kathryn Hill – Context for Change

A Turning Point

And now a personal word,

The Levine Museum of the New South is at a turning point. Kathryn Hill has inherited the Levine Museum at a time when cultural institutions are being disrupted nationally. The Levine Museum faces particular challenges in a rapidly changing competitive landscape in Charlotte.

The mission of the Levine Museum of the New South is to tell the story of the American South after the Civil War, with a focus on Charlotte and the surrounding Carolina Piedmont. Over a remarkable period of innovation and productivity since its founding, the Levine Museum has done just that.

The story goes that in the summer of 1990, an eighth-grade teacher, Anne Batten, felt strongly that Charlotte could do with a new history museum. Anne called a former student of hers, Sally Robinson, a civic leader in Charlotte, and made her pitch. Sally later recalled, “Who could say no to their old eighth-grade teacher?” Over the next year, Sally organized a small committee of community leaders and historians that set plans in motion for a new history museum. The committee became a board of directors. The board hired Robert Weis, a young scholar, as its first executive director, and charged him with establishing a “museum with no walls.” The museum created exhibits and kiosks that were placed around the city, including ones about when Southern women went to college and the history of basketball in the Piedmont. In 1995, the board hired its second executive director, Emily Zimmern, and raised enough funds to purchase a vacant office building. The building was retrofitted, the entrance was moved, and the museum was renamed in honor of philanthropists Sandra and Leon Levine.

The exhibits and programming of the Levine Museum have included *Cotton Fields to Skyscrapers*, an interactive timeline of the development of Charlotte and the Piedmont; *COURAGE: The Carolina Story that Changed America*, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education; *Purses, Platforms & Power*, a fun and enlightening retrospective of women trailblazers in the 1970s; *Changing Places*, addressing issues of growth and community in the early twenty-first century; *Families of Abraham*, a photographic narrative exploring Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faith traditions in Charlotte; *iNUEVOlution!*, showcasing how Latinos are shaping the South; and *K(no)w Justice, K(no)w Peace*, a community-created exhibit about police shootings

throughout the nation and in Charlotte. Other exhibits have explored stories of forgotten musicians, the gay rights movement in America, the war on poverty in the Appalachians, Southern food and clothing, Southern writers and artists, Southern stereotypes in cartoons, and the contributions of Jewish, Cambodian, and Lebanese Americans to Southern culture and Charlotte history. The Levine Museum has told these stories with great skill and compassion, winning national acclaim.

Emily Zimmern, whose ambition and spirit defined the museum and who served as executive director until 2015, said this upon her retirement about the enterprise:

[The] Levine Museum has provided a space where everyone's history is told, where everyone has an opportunity to share their story. We hear from the famous and powerful as well as those whose stories are little known or have never been told ... history matters. History is important for individuals, communities, and nations. It shapes our sense of self and our relationship to one another. It locates us in time and place and helps to give meaning to our lives.

The Levine Museum has given meaning to thousands of citizens whose stories have been told on its exhibit walls and shared in the countless dialogues about community issues that the museum has hosted.

Today the Levine Museum faces a set of challenges very different than a generation ago: What is the museum experience in the digital age? Why go into a building that does not have an archive or collection? Why convene in a space when other spaces are more technologically advanced and suited for gatherings and conversation? How does the Levine Museum position itself against newer institutions and media platforms vying to convene discourse around the same community issues? Should the Levine Museum present Southern history as broadly and objectively as possible, or should it focus on issues of equity and social justice in Charlotte?

Kathryn Hill is faced with these questions. The museum could close, redefine itself, and reopen in a new way. It could lease space in a different building. It could sell its land to a developer and retain space in a newly branded, high-rise structure. It could once again become a "museum with no walls."

Whatever it chooses to do, what will remain true is that our stories give meaning to our lives.

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