**JEPTHA WADE**

**[the relationship of the board to MS]** The nature of the board, frankly, is that it was enjoyable, and not formal, very informal. And nobody had much ego on the line.

But frankly, the reason that the whole thing worked was you, as you demonstrated a few minutes ago in starting to talk about this subject. What was unique, we knew we had a good leader and we knew it didn’t matter whether we had a good administrator. I never figured out whether you were a good administrator or not. It didn’t matter because the results were excellent. And what you had was the capacity to imagine how it might be to have a great gift for what it took kids to learn, **and for a collection of very talented younger people to put on the exhibits, and the extraordinary capacity to motivate them without ego getting in the way.** And the reason in part was, and I think it’s your dyslexia. You have a sort of a left-handed, backward, upside-down way of getting an objective into people’s heads, and then you sort of fumble around as though you were digging your toe in the sand. And the net result is they know that you’re doing a job on them, but they end up wanting to help you. And there aren’t too many leaders who put their ego on the back burner enough so that that’s what happens. And that’s, in a way, why I thought that this project was unlikely to be able to motivate, to help other people much, because it is so dependent on the nature of one individual. That doesn’t mean you’re the only guy who can run a children’s museum, but that was this museum. If you get the point. **[2:00 min]** and I came into it after you had changed the nature of it to a participatory, hands-on kind of thing out in Jamaica Plain.

**[11MSW - a central location and finding museum wharf ]** And the only thing to do at that point was basically to put us in a more central location where we’d have a better shot at the whole, or put it the other way around, the whole of Greater Boston would have a better shot at what we were able to create. Of course, this was a great building and I don’t know, John Bok or who came up with that one [David Burnham and Stuart Pratt]. But it was the right place, and I think it’s still the right place for a whole variety of reasons.

MIKE: Actually, it was David Burnham found it.

Was it? Good for him. I didn’t know that. But then it became a relatively simple matter of raising an enormous amount of money in relation to what the museum had ever done before, and thank god for government participation and tax-exempt financing and so forth and so on. It was complicated. But we had a good museum and it was a good home. After that, of course, it got particularly challenging when the Transportation Museum had to bail out. But then of course you complimented me by making me the president, then you decamped to an irresistible job in Chicago. And what can you do? It was the right thing for you to do. We sort of struggled.

MIKE: Talk about when you said it was fun. Why was it?

[why it was fun] Well, because it was relaxed and because there wasn’t, nobody had an extra agenda. There are a lot of other institutions that are the same. I just came from one this afternoon which is even more powerless, if you will, than the Children's Museum was at that time. So it tends to happen in relatively smaller, with everybody sort of focused on what there is, they know what there is, and small enough that you can get your arm around it. It’s not a university or something like that. Larger institutions, for reasons of the size of the institution, it has – it may happen here depending on who you have running it – become bureaucratized because everybody wants a very clear sense of what their role is. I think maybe one of your talents was that it stayed loose. If you had a problem, you figured out – I don’t know, you tell me how you did it.

MIKE: Well, I messed it up initially, and then I got people like Jim and Pat and Elaine and Phyl to really run it. You asked that question, was I a good manager? I was a very good manager in delegating everything away, because I was running it into the ground.

And that was the sense that made it comfortable, because you did that. But you didn’t put anybody in lockstep is an interesting thing. It was always loose. You were always feeling, you gave the impression of being a blind seer who was looking for the next step. And everybody else had to tell you where it was.

MIKE: Part of that was illusion, because the looseness –

And you created the illusion.

MIKE: But it was a very tightly structured place where people could be loose, but the roles were very defined. They knew what they were supposed to be doing. You could change their roles quickly if you needed to.

But the talent, you know, you can’t – that says, that’s a function of you and the people you got. And it’s not something that can be easily duplicated.

MIKE: And we were having fun, too, in that same sense that you had.

You were [inaudible] it. That’s always fun.

MIKE: And we could do things. We weren’t tied up in knots.

**[Jeptha working on licensing AS&E to do MATCh Boxes]** And it was by nature focused on the future, rather than some kind of preservation of the past. All of those things help. But they also are perhaps more readily duplicated in smaller institutions than in large ones. Now, I’m not sure that’s true, because much of modern management theory is going to task forces and group dynamics in doing just what you did. So it may not be in the future as unusual. But I think it was unusual then. And you had all those interesting little things like the licensed box toys, Matchbox toys.

MIKE: Yeah, talk a little bit about that, because that’s where you went in.

Yeah, there’s where my memory is very weak. All I know is that you somehow got me involved in licensing that damn thing to *American Science and Engineering*. And I was very interested in it, **[open storage and uses of collections in children's museums]** just as I was interested in, as you know, in how you store objects in a museum in a way that makes them accessible without a lot of staff help. Self-explanatory, as it were, [a little bit of] self-teaching. That was one of the things that attracted me was that you had more interest in that than most museum people, which perhaps was a wave of the future. One hopes. It certainly is what’s happened. Witness the, what was it, the *Reader’s Digest* people, the Wallace Collection in the Metropolitan, for example. That’s being done a lot better elsewhere now, but that was one of the early ones.

MIKE: When they had the open storage.

You were ahead of, yeah, I think you were ahead of them.

MIKE: It was parallel, I think. I don’t think we were paying attention to each other, but it was going on at the same time. When the Egyptian Galleries were installed it was just about the same time we were doing the study storage [phases] here.

I found that very encouraging, and it’s the kind of thing that other museums ought to do. And so I was very enthusiastic about it. It’s unclear in an institution of this kind how important the collections are, but if there are no collections, then it isn’t a museum. So you have a little contradiction in terms as to what a children’s museum, there are a lot of them who have no collections at all. And they’re still very effective in giving kids a sense of who they are and what they can do and the world they live in and all the things that you were very interested in. So I’m not sure whether that will remain a permanent part of this institution or not.

MIKE: I think it’s at risk from time to time.

Clearly, it clearly.

MIKE: Because people are asking why are we doing this?

Yeah, we’ve got all this money tied up and why don’t we do what the Science Museum does and chuck it Harvard.

[BREAK IN CONVERSATION]

MIKE: One of the things that occurred to me as we were looking back on this – and both Ben Shore and Elvira talked about this, too – that the board was quite heterogeneous. It wasn’t the standard, you know, and people seemed to be attracted or brought into the board family because they had particular points of view or experience or tools they could contribute to the thing. You came in as a lawyer with some experience with EDC and elementary science study and things like that. And I went to somebody at EDC and said, “We’re going to be eaten alive in going out to the real world to sell our stuff through.... Help!” And, “The person that knows the most about is Jeptha Wade, and besides, he’s a demon negotiator.” And after this was all over, I remember –

I don’t know as I ever demon negotiated for them. But I’d like to think I did.

MIKE: What was the guy who was president of AS&E? The publisher, *American Science and Engineering*. At any rate, he said he thought he was going to go and have this cozy relationship with this little tiny children’s museum, and he felt like he was just put through the wringer by you.

Well, it would be a nice illusion. If I could spread that, I would.

MIKE: Well, your reputation has lasted.

It was fun because the material was fun and it was very much in keeping with what was going on in education then, Physical Science Study Committee, and later on other programs. And of course the study [EDC?] and the like.

MIKE: Did you think that the fact that you went to MIT and ended up a lawyer, that was sort of an unusual entry point. Did that contribute to this notion, and even that Patty is running [inaudible] and everything else?

Well, it was strictly her invention. No, I don’t think that had much to do with it. I became a museum nut at a pretty early age because I kept walking through more than one museum. I just liked museums. And it’s strange that to this day, despite all the efforts that a lot of people including yourself, have put into it, the current craze – and I think it is a craze – foundations want to be able to quantify the effect of every dollar that is spent on a nonprofit effort. And it’s a lot of hooey. It’s a commendable idea, it comes out of the same mindset that insists that MCAS is the way to prove whether kids are learning in school or not. It is one way, but it’s not the only way. And the museum function in our society, other than putting kids in touch with all kinds of reality that isn’t on a screen, which I think is becoming more valuable not less so, is of uncertain and not provable value. But I think if we lost the museums we’d lose a lot. This is not a comment to be limited to art museums. I mean, they are preserving something and people want to come in and see them. The same is true, I suppose, of most natural history and other related museums. They want, closer to the real thing. But the relationship between what we do here and what Zoom does on the tube is sort of interesting. When you’re trying to figure the number of people that get a shot at it when it’s on the tube vs. the more limited number that are able to go to a place is a hard thing to prove. And I think both have their place. And I’m not sure what Henry Beckton would say.

MIKE: I think he’d agree. A lot of my research that I’ve been doing since I left the Pew Museum in the last decade since I went to the University of Chicago is looking at that business of so what? And I started out with the assumption that whatever, well, there was a lot of research going on about what, here’s somebody leaving the gallery and what did they learn at this moment? And there’s some stuff that they started more recently which is they got on the phone to somebody a month later and say “What do you remember from that thing?” But when I was doing my interviews of people about learning experiences in museums, they reported things from their childhood or 50 years ago, and very vivid things. So you could say well, that’s all well and good, but is this all made up or is there something that you can look at that says this is why, or here is the real link between the long-term memory and sense of meaning that it created. So most of my recent research was to say, I was doing it for myself just to try it out. About a decade ago I wrote five memories of museum experiences, very vivid. I wrote in detail, because I thought I remembered this detail. One was going and looking at a nail being made at Sturbridge Village. Another was an exhibit at MoMA during the Second World War on maps. Another one also at the Museum of Modern Art on Indian art. And one was a diorama at the American Museum of Natural History as a New York kid. This was my stock in trade because I couldn’t read so I was in there a lot. And so I wrote these down, and it occurred to me last year, because all of these places except for Sturbridge Village, were gone. They were temporary exhibits or they were deinstalled. And so I thought if we could find a record of what was actually in those exhibitions, since I, without anything in mind, my memories that I wrote down could be [inaudible] and compared with the archival record of those exhibits. So I’m in the process of doing that. And in each of the cases they bear out. The thing I wrote there is just as I remembered it, except in each case there was at least one element which, thinking about why it was different, is that there was a gap in my memory, and to smooth out the thing unconsciously, that gestalt thing, I smoothed out that thing until my creative mind filled it in. So even the fact that that thing is radically different, but it’s a small piece of the whole thing. They don’t really have anything like making the nail. It was the way they actually broke off the nail and it was done in a slightly different way than I described. But we have the videotape of how they’re still doing it, and you can see exactly where that difference is. And the fact that it’s different, I think, makes these observations more, you know, you can believe in the fact that this memory is, the fact that it’s very complete and accurate except the hole.

Well, I think the whole concept of getting into an exhibit to that extent is what makes it work. And we have now, for instance Boston has the Arts Academy, which is for music and I guess dance probably, and I don’t think the Arts Academy does theater, but I don’t think it does painting. That’s done elsewhere. But there are many students who may not be a large percentage of the total, but if you’re going to educate them, you really have to give them something a little different. And I think museums are particularly effective with children who may have some problems in other respects. There are a great many people have not graduated from college and still been extremely successful. Gates being one of them. There are lots of things you learn that you don’t learn in formal educational environment. And I think it’s a little foolish of the government as a whole to have such faith in the numbers.

MIKE: Yeah. It’s an overinvestment in a very narrow way of [inaudible].

A narrow way. But it may be applicable. And some kind of a whip as well as a carrot is needed, such as running schools until 3:30 instead of 1:30, and make it 4:30. But we’re not going to solve the world’s problems on how to fix our educational system here tonight.

MIKE: Talk a little bit about the mix of people that you worked with.

Well, there was a diverse group, a very able group. As I say, they were just [inaudible] an interesting project and were enthusiastic about it. I was a museum nut. I’m not sure how many of the others were. A lot of them were nuts about children, and that probably was one of the main motivators, but I don’t know that. You’d have to ask them.

MIKE: Because they had their own kids at about the same time, and it was an investment.

Yeah, sure. That’s what you’d expect. But there were a lot of very able young mothers, we had a whole succession of presidents. And you worked with some of them and it continued to do that. And it’s a fun place. I think the most fun perhaps getting it started, the job you succeeded at.

MIKE: Well, it was 50 years old when I arrived, but that’s alright.

Well, but you were young. We all like to think we’re young at heart. You remade the little Children's Museum out there, which was a good concept to start with. But you remade it.

MIKE: Were there things that you remember – I’m not pushing you to dig down beyond – things that were particular troublesome or difficult, or things didn’t work particularly well?

No. I remember exercising my own ego a little bit when somebody was kind enough to give us a large gift invested by Julian Robertson, a very successful venture – it wasn’t hedge funds, but it was sort the equivalent – Tiger Investments, I think it was. And it worked find for a while, but I thought they were being a little bit loose on it. Then all of a sudden it started going south in a hurry. And I think that was about when either Ken came in, or Lou did, I’m not sure which. I was Emeritus at that point. He said, “Do you want to take another look at that hot shot investment? We don’t have a big capital, I’m not sure we’re in the hot shot league.” That’s the only one I remember.

MIKE: Well, one of the things that I remember, one of the specific points, the thing that we all counted on for you was to keep it very clear where we were walking towards the edge of doing inappropriate stuff, legally or any other way like that. I mean, you were the keeper of the –

The faith of the community or something like that?

MIKE: You said, you know, “Uh-nn,” or, “If you’re going to do that....” fill in the blank.

I remember, not with this institution, but one that had a lot of government grants, and they were struggling to make the program successful, and it involved some incentives on the private organization, and it was very valuable to remember that the money came from the Congress, write a letter to the department that’s giving you the money for this, and explain exactly how you are stimulating the distribution of this. Because there is in here the seeds of someone complaining how is competing on the outside and will consider this to be government-supposed competition with their business. Make it very clear that the grant or the organization in the government that gave them money knew exactly what you were going to do and how you were going to do it. And that kind of thing can be enormously valuable. It was enormously valuable in that case. It saved their bacon. They had a Congressional investigation, and the documentation was absolutely explicit and very well labeled. That sort of thing is important. And that’s what lawyers if they’re useful can sometimes have done for you.

MIKE: Ben yesterday talked about that he felt among, in contrast to another museum board that he served on, is that he appreciated the sort of transparency. There was nothing hidden.

[**continued from p 1]** That’s what I meant about ego, yeah, the absence of ego on the part of individuals. There was no hidden agendas. And therefore very relaxed. That’s relaxing.

MIKE: He would say he could relax because he knew what was going on, and he could contribute his part and be listened to, but there was no side deals or things like that.

I don’t see that much in other institutions, either. It’s difficult enough to run these places without worrying too much about that. You tickled something in my memory a minute ago and it’ll have to come back to me. I can’t remember when.

I was thinking when you were talking about the.... I think one of the places we got lucky was Jon Bok’s talents in getting the museum wharf concept passed and the loans effected and so forth. This took a lot of [inaudible].

MIKE: And Dan Prigmore who was brought in, too, as a paid person. Remember? He worked for Fidelity on their projects. And we were having troubled getting passed, we worked like crazy for a couple of years and then we were stuck. And then somebody said, “Let’s see if we could borrow Dan Prigmore to manage the project. And one of the things he did – he was a very good construction manager, but he was broader than that. He had all these relationships with the banks, with places that he’d done loans before. He brought different architects that he was used to working with. So it was barebones. He had this wonderful expression, “This building is very straightforward and it’s trying to tell us something. We should listen to it. Don’t do something stupid.”

Well, it was fascinating because we were on a geological fault that required all of these beams to be sort of strapped together with iron.

MIKE: Yeah, so it wouldn’t fall. And under here is plywood as a membrane for the damn thing. The strapping plus the membrane.

I hadn’t appreciated the membrane.

MIKE: That’s why instead of beautiful wooden floors we have plywood above this stuff and carpet on top of it.

To hold the beams in place, yeah.

MIKE: But somehow or other, strapping working against the – I don’t know really how it works.

But it spreads otherwise, yeah. I think that probably shoots my bolt.

**[END OF INTERVIEW]**