

The year 2020 will stand in the memories of many people as a symbol of upheaval, unpredictability, and change. But if 2020 is the proverbial winter of our discontent, 2021 holds the promise of glorious summer. The year promises to be a time of healing, of emerging from our homes and into a changed world—a “new normal.” It was only fitting, then, that the TAM 2021 Conference was entitled ReVision. Although conducted digitally, the conference was an amazing opportunity for museum professionals of all kinds to rekindle our sense of community and prepare to step forward into the new reality of museums together.

The “TAM Fam” is an incredibly welcoming, warm, and good-natured group. When I applied for a scholarship to attend the 2021 conference, I had not anticipated that the community I would find in TAM was something I’d sorely needed. I moved to Tennessee mid-pandemic and, as a result, had not met many people or had many meaningful interactions (outside of my two wonderful co-workers). Attending the TAM conference, even from a distance, brought me closer to people—particularly those in my field—than I’ve been in some time. If ever you’ve been concerned about being the “new kid” in an academic or professional community, know that you need not be concerned about being the fresh face at TAM.

TAM 2021 had several sessions about professional development and specific collection concerns, but the highlight was those sessions that epitomized the ReVision theme. Our country is struggling to reconcile its past with who it thinks it is. While this process has been painful—and painfully slow—museums can help by holding up a mirror to America and encouraging it to face both the good and bad parts of itself.

TAM’s panel of speakers offered attendees a variety of reasons and ways to help America in its journey of self-rediscovery, reconciliation, and healing. One museum theme, mentioned by several speakers, was the multiplicity of narratives in history and the way they can be incorporated into museum and heritage work. James Manning (Oaklands Mansion) discussed the “parallel lines” technique of storytelling Oaklands has used to describe and contrast the lives of white and Black, free and enslaved individuals who traversed its halls—a shift away from the white-only perspectives told in so many museums and heritage sites around the country. Bridgette Jones (Tennessee State Museum), LaNesha DeBardelaben (Northwest African American Museum), Dr. Learotha Williams (Tennessee State University), and Tracy Lauritzen Wright (ArtsMemphis) encouraged attendees to come together with other professions and communities to “co-create a future” in which justice and equity matter and we become part of the community we serve, not just passive observers. Lisa Oakley (East Tennessee Historical Society), Dan Pomeroy (Tennessee State Museum), Linda Caldwell (Etowah Historical Commission & Etowah Depot Museum), Debbie Shaw (Tennessee State Museum), and Scott Almany (Birthplace of Country Music) echoed that we have a responsibility to the properties and objects in our care, for the communities around us, and to others in the museum profession. Susie Wilkening (Susie Wilkening, Inc.) concluded the conference by suggesting ways to discuss polarizing topics in a polarized time: recognize the version of itself America aspires to be, foster dialogue, mainstream inclusive content, and do what you can to meet people where they are so that museums and visitors can grow together.

TAM 2021 was an inspiration that gave me hope for the future of museums and, by extension, the spaces in which they exist. Speakers did not merely provide lip service nor did they rehash the need for change and inclusivity in museums. They provided attendees with actionable steps, real-world

strategies, and the encouragement to proceed with the difficult but necessary changes our field is facing. More than that—they provided all this knowledge with the warmth of a cadre of professional friends enjoying coffee in the cafes, parks, bookstores, and other spaces we've all so desperately missed.