

Narrator: LaNesha DeBardelaben

Project: AAAM Oral History

Interviewer: Dr. Robby Lockett

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[00:00:04.54] Q: My name's Robby Lockett. I'm a professor of history and director of the marble Walker Center at Jackson State University. Today is August the 27th, 2021. It's approximately 3 pm central time. I'm here with LaNesha DeBardelaben. LaNesha, thank you for joining me. For the purposes of the record, will you state your full name and spell it for us?

LaNesha DeBardelaben: Absolutely, LaNesha DeBardelaben, L-A-N-E-S-H-A D-E-B-A-R-D-E-L-A-B-E-N

Q: Thanks, let's begin with some basic biographical information. Tell us a little bit about yourself: where you're from, how you grew up, what your family was like, your educational background, those kinds of things.

DeBardelaben: First, Robby, let me just say that I am delighted to be here; thank you for the invitation to be a part of this oral history narration. I just take my hat off to you and to your full team there, recording these important stories. I am from a small town two hours north of Detroit called Saginaw, Michigan. My family, both maternal and paternal, are both from Mississippi. Paternal parents are from Hickory, Mississippi, and my maternal family is from Grenada, Mississippi, but both families migrated north and settled in Saginaw, Michigan which was, at one point, a lucrative auto-industry zone for African Americans. Born in the early 1980s, grew up as an 80's baby, and had just the fortune to grow up in what felt like a loving

village. Although we were impoverished financially, I was rich in love and in folks who really cared about the children and invested in us and poured just wisdom and their hopes and their dreams and their best into us. And so I was mentored by a plethora of amazing community members, particularly Black women educators and Black women librarians and Black church women. And, as a result, I gravitated towards African American history, hearing about these stories, these family stories, of my family in Mississippi. I had never gone to Mississippi as a child, I only knew of my ancestral land through these stories that my family told me, and of course it piqued my interest. How and why did my family settle in Michigan from Mississippi, by way originally of Africa? And so I pursued an undergraduate degree in history, U.S. History and African American history, but with a focus on education, and was planning to teach high school history and English until I discovered the world of museums, and this was...I fell into the discovery of a career in museums when I was a student in Nairobi, Kenya, at the University of Nairobi. In Kenya, Africa, we were required to do a cultural education project, and I was located near the National Museum of Kenya and discovered that there was an education department assistantship and that changed everything for me. Prior to that, I really was not even aware of a career in museums at all, because of the barriers to museums in my small community. Town libraries were free, museums were not. Libraries were right near me and my neighborhood, the museums were not, and so I had not been aware of a career in museums until I was in college...junior year in college and it changed the trajectory of my career path and I have just been in love with this field and the opportunities that this work brings.

Q: So what was your early career path? You graduated with a degree in history, is that right?

DeBardelaben: I did. It was a major in history, a minor in English, and I was certified to teach K-12.

[00:05:38:00] Q: And you never taught though, what was your early career like?

DeBardelaben: Right, so my grandmother told me that a black woman must have as many tools in her tool belt, and so I stayed on the track to be a teacher, so I student taught at my old high school in Saginaw, Michigan...was able to give back and I became certified, but I did not pursue classroom teaching or instead went directly into a master's program in museum studies. Received, gratefully, a full ride to the University of Missouri at St. Louis, really strong museum studies program, and it allowed me to immerse myself in the theory and practice of museum work for two years. While I was in St. Louis, I interned at the St. Louis Science Center in the education department there, as well as worked at the Missouri Historical Society where I met and was mentored by one of the most influential women in my career, Jackie Dace. That's where I met Jackie Dace and she just took me under her wings and taught me the ropes in museum education. I also completed my master's thesis at the St. Louis Black World History Museum. It's a small African American museum in St. Louis and I did a curriculum project there. And so immediately after undergrad, I knew that I was going to spend my career in museum education, and so I wanted to become fluent in theory and practice, because, again, museums were pretty much foreign to me at that point, and I was the only African American in the program and had a wonderful experience. Now, St. Louis was a really dynamic place to study museums, and that's where my career first began. As soon as I graduated from the program in 2002, I entered the field. My first position was as assistant curator of programs at the Alfred P. Sloan Museum in Flint, Michigan, it's part of the Flint Cultural Center and it was just a golden opportunity for me to apply all that I had learned in the museum studies program and just to be able to bridge the gap between the museum and the African American community in Flint, Michigan, and so to take full advantage to learn, learn how to lead, learn how to serve, learn how to be a museum professional and student of the museum resources and service to community.

[00:09:19:00] Q: I want to ask you about your museum studies program, since there will be students listening to this. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what that curriculum was like for you and what specifically you did for your master's thesis?

DeBardelaben: Absolutely. The program that I had to do was comprehensive, it was...it allowed me to become a generalist in the field, but I did have a specialization in museum education. So some of my cohort members chose to specialize in exhibition development, some chose to focus on administration, some chose to focus on collections management. Having my life influenced so much by education and the power of education to liberate, to break cycles of poverty and so forth, I knew that museum education was certainly my path to serving the field, and so the curriculum was broad. I did take exhibition development and worked on an exhibition at the Mark Twain House and Museum, they are near St. Louis... created an exhibition for that museum, took collections management and intro to curatorial work, where we learned the art and the science of curatorial practice, professional curator of practice, we also...it was also a master's in history, so it was a joint program in museum studies and U.S. history, and so I was able to simultaneously take courses in U.S. history, African American history, African history, I was able to TA for one of the professors, an African history professor, and so it was a really well rounded experience. I rejoice when I see individuals pursuing museum studies degrees, a public history degree, and then enter the field, because it just gives a more well-rounded perspective to one's museum work, and what I did was created a curriculum about York, who was the African American in the Lewis and Clark expedition. I created an education curriculum on the exhibition that was at the St. Louis Black History Museum and how teachers could utilize that exhibition to really bring African American

history to life and to bring the story of York, so very relevant perspective for middle school students.

Q: I was going to ask you what it means, and I again, I think this is helpful for students, to be a museum educator...with your background in that, what does that really mean to you?

DeBardelaben: It's the best job ever. So museum education means that the entire museum is our classroom, that the walls are our chalkboard, that [inaudible] is the world...citizens are our students, that we are able to really shift ways of thinking and ways of being by engaging people with the opportunity to discover more about themselves...to challenge, critique, and change systems of inequity around them by using African American history, art, and culture. It means to literally empower our communities, to be better, and to do better, and to know more through our programming and through experiential encounters with us as a museum

[00:14:38:00] Q: So your career took you to Flint. Where has your career path gone since then? To where you are today, what has your journey been?

DeBardelaben: Yeah so I was at the Sloan Museum for my first two years of my career and then I received this amazing opportunity to work directly with classroom teachers in bringing African American history to the classroom through museums, through archives, through primary source documents, as the project manager of a Teaching American History Grant program with the Flint community schools. So during this time, this was the early 2000s...2006 through 2010...I was with the Flint community schools, and this was the time when there were these programs called the Teaching American History Grant program and it allowed museum curators and public school districts and university professors and classroom teachers to all come together to teach history differently. Just to bring a fresh teaching reality to K-12

education, and so I served as the project manager creating access for K-12 classroom teachers into museum exhibitions, special collections, archival repositories, to historians, and so, for four years I focused on engaging elementary, middle, and high school teachers with public history, pretty much. And when that grant program came to an end, I was so moved...because I worked with hundreds of teachers in that program, and I was so moved at what I saw. I literally saw just this enthusiasm, this evolution in the way humanities were taught in classrooms and I wanted to go deeper with that, and so I went back to school to get a second master's in library science and to be trained in professionally using primary source documents to bring greater meaning to our communities, understanding how to really expertly handle the first edition of Frederick Douglass's book and then how do we make these sorts of primary source documents usable for classroom teachers, but also the general public in museums. And so I went to Indiana University - Bloomington on a full ride scholarship, so all these degrees have been fully covered with scholarships and I'm so grateful for that support, and received a master's in library science with a concentration in archival management. It's a two year program and I lived in Indiana, and then right after that, as soon as I came out of that program, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History was looking for an archivist and a director of archives and libraries for their research center, and so that's when I relocated back to Michigan this was in 2010...2010, 2011, and began my wonderful 10 year at the Charles Wright Museum.

[00:19:09:00] Q: What was that work like as the archivist at Charles Wright?

DeBardelaben: It was exhilarating, so rewarding, so meaningful. The research library at the Charles Wright Museum is home to significantly important collections, including a portion of the Malcolm X papers are preserved there, a portion of Rosa Parks' papers are preserved there. She of course relocated to Detroit to live the rest of her life in Detroit, and a portion of her

papers are there. Malcolm X, of course, was at one point called Detroit Red, he lived in Detroit, and a portion of his papers are there. So many important papers and collections...a significant Underground Railroad collection is there, the Blanche Coggin papers, and so it was an honor to lead the preservation efforts on these important collections and to make them accessible to scholars and students and the general public.

Q: What's been your journey since Charles Wright?

DeBardelaben: I am so grateful for my time at the Wright Museum, it will always be my professional home because that is where I was groomed for leadership in the field, Juanita Moore took me under her wing and literally invested the best in me, I'm so grateful for my time at the Wright. I was there for six years and was entrusted with leadership opportunities that led me to serve as the senior vice president of education and exhibitions at the Wright Museum and from there, I received a call from Seattle in the fall of 2017. The Northwest African American Museum, located in Seattle, Washington, was searching for an executive director and the more I learned the story of NAAM, the more I realized that this institution is a gem and one that I would be honored to serve, and so I received the call to be its executive director and to work fall 2017, and I relocated from Detroit to Seattle in December and started. So, because I love my work so much, my last day at the Wright Museum was December 3, 2017, and my first day in Seattle was December 6, 2017. I wasted no time getting to the work, because this is so much more than a career, it is a calling. It is so much more than a profession. This is my passion and my focus. I often times think about Dr. Carter G. Woodson so that he's married to the work. I often think about Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune who spent her life building institutions, she was an institution builder, and I feel their spirit in the work that I do, and so I came to The Northwest African American Museum in December of 2017. I've been here for three and a half years and I'm so proud of this museum and so pleased with the growth and the successes that

this team has produced...of the staff, the board, the community, the donors...this is truly a special place.

[00:24:03:00] Q: So tell us about the Northwest African American Museum and what you do on a day to day basis.

DeBardelaben: The Northwest African American Museum is one of the premier African American museums in the west. We literally advance justice and equity through education and the arts. We are so much more than a museum and we have spent the last 13 years engaging with our community and now expanding to regional engagement in really meaningful ways. The museum was established in 2008, opened its doors in 2008, but the quest for an African American museum dates further back from that here in Seattle. It was Black women educators in the 1960s and the 1970s, who envisioned there being, eventually, the space and place for African American heritage, art, and culture to be celebrated and commemorated. It was in the 1980s that a group of African American community activists occupied the Colman School building for eight years from 1985 to 1993 to claim this space for what will become the African American museum where it is now. The Colman School building, which is the home of NAAM, was built in 1909 and sits at the corner of 23rd and Massachusetts which, historically, was the African American community, and until recently gentrification, it no longer is predominantly an African American community. But during the '80s, the corner of 23rd and Mass was at the heart of the Black community and the school went vacant in the late-1970s, early-1980s, it went vacant and the city was planning to do something differently with this location and they were going to transform the school for different uses, but the African American community said, "No, absolutely not," and these particular activist, five Black men, entered the building and would not leave for eight years until the city agreed that the space would be an African American museum. Over the course of time, there were some different ideologies and ideas about the

direction of the African American museum that should be located here, and one of the groups that had an idea prevailed, and that group named it the Northwest African American Museum. The Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle purchased the Colman School building and leased out the main floor to the Northwest African American Museum. It opened in 2008, the museum, and for 13 years now, the Northwest African American Museum has been about the business of community education, innovation, and equity. We have a variety of programs that engage the entire family, from our youth curator program to our youth summer writing camps to Black Santa in December, Kwanzaa in December, just all kinds of activities for children throughout the year. We have celebrations for elders. We hold a National Grandparents Day celebration in partnership with AARP. We have not only a King Day program, but a Malcolm X Day program as well, and we just are one of the most diverse, inclusive, and accessible educational institutions in our region.

[00:29:32:00] Q: How would you describe your work on a day-to-day basis?

DeBardelaben: As the President and CEO of the museum, so in January of 2021, the board expanded my title from executive director to President and CEO. And, as the President and CEO of the museum, I am responsible for everything, at the end of the day, regarding this museum. And so it involves, on a day to day basis: marketing, branding, PR, communications. I am constantly the face of the museum. As soon as I'm off this call, I have a two o'clock interview with a media journalist to talk about our upcoming weekend programs. So marketing and communications, fundraising is a top priority of mine, we have grown the museum's operating budget. We are growing the museum's endowment, and that involves continuous engagement with donors and funders which includes grant writing and reviewing the grant proposals written by the grant writer. So all elements of fundraising. Educational programming. Programming is my thing. I love museum programming as a museum educator,

and so I am very involved in programming, ensuring that the museum is putting fidelity to our education mission. Education is, of course, what we are. Operations, so ensuring that the facilities and the museum building and all of our IT and HR and administration and infrastructure is running smoothly. Board engagement, engaging with the board; staff development, coaching, mentoring, supporting our staff because you know, our staff members have everything that they need to thrive in the work. Building partnerships, external engagement. The list goes on, literally. Strategic planning...we're literally in the process now of writing our 2022 to 2025 strategic plan, and I am at the center, a core of that work, so it's pretty non-stop working with Black artists. We currently don't have a curator, so I am front-line communicator regarding exhibitions, developing exhibitions, locating, building, the exhibition schedule, and so the whole gamut of museum administration, leadership, and management.

Q: And what's the size of your staff and what kind of departments do they represent?

DeBardelaben: So when we are fully staffed, we have 13 staff members, so it's a fairly small museum. Due to covid closures, we have gone down to five and a half staff members, and we have...I report to the board of directors. We have currently 13 board members, we are in the process of recruiting 10 over the next two years...10 new board members...I report to them and then we have a leadership team that reports directly to me, and that is our marketing director, our operations director, our development director, and our education director, so four departments. Then they each have a staff member, coordinators: education coordinator, communications coordinator, grants and developments coordinator, facilities coordinator, and then there is a bookkeeper that handles the books, the accounting, the financials of the museum. We have a contractual CPA that helps us with our financials as well, and all of our financial tax reporting and so forth, and then I have a part-time executive assistant and office manager that just helps to keep the office going. And then we will

eventually have a curator joining us next week, our back in the full swing of operating and so collaboration is so key and critical for this kind of team. We work together, support one another, we see and have the same vision for the museum, we're excited about where we're going. All in a sense...fundraisers, and because every encounter that we have in any role is all about supporting the sustainability of the museum and we're all, in a sense, leaders, leading some thing that will lead to the success of this museum.

[00:35:38:00] Q: You mentioned covid, how has your museum work evolved to meet the demands of this kind of ever-changing modern world, especially in the context of covid. It sounds like your staffing has been hit in particular, but you know, what are the other things that you've done to meet those demands?

DeBardelaben: So, we closed our doors March of 2020 and we literally saw a halt in our earned revenue. We were relying heavily on our revenue to help us meet our operating budget needs. Gratefully, the contributed revenue, the donations, came in at very generous levels over the last year and a half, and so Covid has kept our physical doors closed, but we have not stopped operating as a museum and our mission has not slowed down. We literally are, I would say, are mostly active now, than even when we were [inaudible]. We have created a new choir, an inspiration choir, called the African American Cultural Ensemble, because we were noticing so many people were having a hard time with the changes in the world and just battling depression and hopelessness and lots of suffering, and so we know that African American history is a source of inspiration. So not being able to get into the museum to see the artwork, to see the stories...we took the stories outdoors, created a choir, a traveling choir, that's performing, bringing hope and help and healing to communities through song, through Black musical heritage. We took our reading room outdoors and took it on the road. It is now called the Knowledge is Power Book Giveaway Program. We've given over 10,000 African

American, new, beautifully illustrated children's books to children in a variety of places, and this is because covid closed our doors and we have to innovate. And the list just goes on in terms of ways that we have pivoted and risen above the challenges that we have faced.

Q: You've talked about those challenges, I'm wondering what are the biggest rewards in the work that you do?

DeBardelaben: What was the last part?

Q: What are the biggest rewards in the work that you do?

LaNesha DeBardelaben: My goodness, too many to name, Dr. Lockett. The privilege to honor the ancestors feeds and fuels our souls here at NAAM. We are excited about this new series called the Descendants series, for instance. We launched it in the fall of 2019 with a conversation featuring the great-granddaughter of Ida B. Wells, and we held a Descendant series in February of 2020, right before covid, hit with the descendants of Freedom Seekers, like Dred Scott and Williams Grimes and Solomon Northup...their descendants came here to Seattle. The very next month, covid closed our doors but we listened to the ancestors, and we knew that their voices needed to be heard now more than ever, and so we simply took it to the virtual platform and, most recently, we featured a conversation with the great-great-granddaughter of Madam CJ Walker, and this weekend we will be in conversation with the great-grandson of W.E.B. DuBois and in October, the great-great-great-grandniece of Harriet Tubman, and so this work is so personally, culturally, professionally, and spiritually fulfilling for all of us that work here, that it oftentimes does not feel like work, it just...it gives...it keeps our eyes on the prize.

[00:42:07:00] Q: Tell me about your experience and history with the Association of African American Museums and your relationship to the organization today.

LaNesha DeBardelaben: The Association of African American Museums, the other beloved organization that so near and dear to my heart. I would not be who I am if it were not for AAAM...so grateful for founders who had the vision to incorporate this organization in 1978 in Detroit, Michigan, and for 43 years now, it has been a beacon of light for the field, the Black museums field, that has been our professional home. I came into AAAM in 2004. Conference was in North Carolina, and I corresponded with Bill Billingsley with an interest to learn more about the association; he was the face of the association at that time, to my knowledge. I had just graduated not too long ago from the museum studies school program, and I had faintly heard of AAAM, but did not have a direct access into it at the time. And when Mr. Billingsley just so warmly and graciously responded and welcomed me in and provided a Burls Wright Fellowship for me to attend, it helped to bring me into a network that I would eventually, deeply appreciate and rely upon for collegiality and collaboration. So that was in 2004, and I did not attend any additional meetings until 2012 or 2013, and that's when I really put my heart and soul into AAAM then and have not looked back since.

[00:45:39:00] Q: And talk about your role today with AAAM.

DeBardelaben: I joined the board, again, thanks to Juanita Moore's mentorship, I joined the board of AAAM in 2016 and immediately just became involved in serving the organization and serving the field and somewhere along the way, I became secretary of the board and from there I became Vice President, and I'm so grateful that colleagues across the country entrusted me to lead the organization as national President of the board beginning in 2019, so I am in my concluding year, as the President of the board of AAAM. My term will conclude in

2022 and I'm so pleased with the growth of AAAM over the past few years, because I tell you, I remember in 2016 at the conference, hearing the membership total being 226 members at that time in 2016 at the conference, and I have a picture, because Sam Black, who was President at the time, was doing his annual report at the business meeting and he had a slide and it had all the stats of AAAM: number of members, number of donations, and I took a picture of that slide, and I remember saying 226, number of members, and here we are today, thanks to the tremendous leadership of current AAAM Executive Director Vedet Coleman-Robinson, and an amazing staff and board and donors, we are at over 1000 members of AAAM, historic milestone. And it's because of leadership, great leadership with our Executive Director Vedet Robinson, and all the individuals who have poured their best into AAAM and bringing it to a place of offering high value and high visibility for the field.

Q: You've mentioned a lot of folks, but who are the people who have had the greatest impact on you in the Black museum field?

DeBardelaben: You know, I am so grateful for all of my colleagues, my contemporaries, but I have to just salute those who came before all of us, the founders of AAAM. I look at their stories and I read their professional biographies and I am just in awe that they had vision, even when sometimes there was no provision, and I first just honor and salute the trailblazers of the Black museums field going back to Icabod Flewellen and Dr. Charles Wright and Dr. Margaret Burroughs, John Kinard, Rowena Stewart...so grateful for that generation of leaders of the field, and those who literally touched my life and touched my career and invested in me. I would not be who I am if it were not for Juanita Moore. She is my north star in every way and those who just believed in me like Dr. John Fleming, Dr. Deborah Mack, Jackie Dace, so, so, so grateful for those mentors and just grateful for the example of excellence that Lonnie Bunch has set for all of us in the field, and so, you know, the one who has just personally touched me

the most - Juanita Moore, former president of AAAM, former president and CEO of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, founding director of the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis - Juanita is a superstar.

[00:51:30:00] Q: You mentioned the vision of the founders, what is your vision for the future of this field?

DeBardelaben: Every Black museum rise to their fullest extent and have a prosperous endowment that will ensure their long term strength and success. I believe that every Black museum deserves to have, and needs to have, a sizable endowment...and what we see is real world inequity when our Black museums do not have the endowment that's needed to breathe and to think strategically long term, my vision is for sizable endowments for every Black museum.

[00:53:00:00] Q: Last question. For people who want to enter into this work, what are your recommendations and any closing comments for them?

DeBardelaben: Become a part of a professional association, and I highly recommend that be AAAM, but invest in your learning so that when it's time for you to lead, you will be ready, you will be poised, you will be prepared, and you will be positioned for success. Learn the history of the field and use those stories of the past to push you forward, even when the time gets tough.

Q: LaNesha DeBardelaben, thank you very much for being here and joining me today in this conversation. I'm very grateful for you.

LaNesha DeBardelaben: Thank you, Dr. Lockett, it has been a delight, thank you for inviting me.