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Tamara Loewenthal named next director of Lotus Education and Arts Foundation

By Jenny Porter Tilley The Herald-Times May 15, 2019 Updated 15 hrs ago



Tamara Loewenthal, director of Lotus Music Festival, in Bloomington, Ind. Wednesday, May 15, 2019. (Chris Howell/Herald-Times)

Chris Howell

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Tamara Loewenthal isn't new to the Lotus scene — she's been a volunteer, performer, board member and staff member during the past 20 years. Now, she'll take the reins as the new executive director of the Lotus Education and Arts Foundation.

Leading up to the 26th annual Lotus World Music & Arts Festival, which will take place Sept. 26-29, Loewenthal will tackle managing a new space, expanding spring programming and maintaining the past quality and success of Lotus events.

In January, the Bloomington nonprofit organization began the search for a new leader when its former director, Sunni Fass, accepted a position in Indiana University's Office of International Development. Since then, board member Denise Lessow has been filling in as interim executive director.

"Tamara will be an exceptional executive director of a very talented and caring staff, and has earned this leadership role," Lessow said in a news release.

Loewenthal first performed at the Lotus World Music & Arts Festival in 1998, as part of Rhythm in Shoes, a touring dance group. Since then, she's performed with other groups, including Fiddle 'n' Feet, which has been a part of Lotus Blossoms educational programming.

A folk dancer since the mid-1980s, Loewenthal also plays the fiddle and is a dance caller for square dancing and contra dances — including the weekly local event at Harmony School. Dance calling may not be on the syllabus for nonprofit management, but it's a role that prepared her for her most recent Lotus role as volunteer coordinator, and will continue to serve her as director.

"Often the caller is standing a little higher than the dancers," she said. "You're making sure the dance flows, looking for weak points on the floor." While some people may know exactly what to do, others might be trying it out for the first time and get lost. "It's trying to help them along so they can be part of the dance."

Loewenthal has recently served as volunteer coordinator, a position crucial to an organization with so many volunteers — around 500 for the festival alone, and at least another 100 throughout the year. One of her goals as director is to continue Lotus' strong tradition of a loyal, reliable and well-trained volunteer force. She calls them the "heart and soul of the organization" and says their work, translated to a dollar amount, would exceed \$1 million annually.

"Lotus began as a vision for what would be wonderful to have in our community," she said. "When we know there are people who share the vision, we want to bring them in. That's what volunteers are — they're people who share the vision."

And Lotus' vision has expanded since Loewenthal's time as a site coordinator for the festival in the late 1990s, when local businesses on upper floors would help out by letting them run phone lines down to the street. With more events year round, she said she hopes to expand connections in other communities. This year, Lotus Blossoms events were hosted in nearby areas, including Columbus and Paoli.

When Lotus hosts performances elsewhere, she hopes in the future they will be able to include more people those communities by expanding local partnerships. She's been interested to see the reactions of children in more remote, primarily white areas who see members of other cultures for the first time.

"For them, bringing in an artist from Africa or Asia, without fail, the reaction is positive. It is amazing," she said. "If kids are exposed to this on a yearly basis, and a different artist every year ... if you can hear that and see that, you just have a more open attitude."

She also said discussions of additional local collaborations — with Fairview Elementary School, walking distance from the Lotus Firebay, and the Warehouse, which has arts programming — are in the works. Lotus officials will continue seeking programming in Bloomington and beyond that fits with the organization's mission.

Loewenthal was heavily involved in the renovation of the Firebay, which is available for rent. She said the organization will continue to prioritize world music, arts and cultures, but they're open to various possibilities for renting out the space. It's now being used regularly on Thursdays for Ritmos Latinos, a Latin American dance group.

With Loewenthal's appointment, Lotus will be seeking a part-time replacement for volunteer coordinator. Currently, all paid staff of Lotus are women. Loewenthal said it's not because they've tried to hit hiring markers, but that it could be attributed to strong women — including Fass — who have been involved with the organization. When Fass began as director in 2013, Loewenthal said, "she was great — very no-nonsense."

As for her own leadership style, Loewenthal said, “For me, it’s about problem-solving. This is where we are now, what do we do? We can go back later when doing evaluations and say this might have been better, we could have done this better. But it’s really about getting the job done.”

Contact Jenny Porter Tilley at 812-331-4377, jtilley@heraldt.com or follow @jennynlyne on Twitter.

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