

StoryCorps Interview at the Mid-America Science Museum

"I could turn an area of the museum into a primordial existence..."

Niles Ellis, long time designer at the Mid-American Science Museum in Hot Springs, Arkansas, talks with one of his colleagues, Lori Arnold who joined his team in 2016. Niles recalls his first years at the museum when there was very little funding and how the museum has grown over the years.

Niles Ellis: Joe Eblem hired me. He was the Assistant Director at the time. He kind of tested me so, he told me to put a bubble blower that they had kind of manufactured... uh he said, "Get that working." So I took the top of a paint can and I took a piece of PVC pipe that has a screw coupling in one end and a slip fitting in the other end of it and I just screwed it into it and I just put it over the end of the fan. Probably a couple of days later, Joe called me into his office and he said, "That's the kind of thinking that we're looking for," because the museum has never had a lot of money. I didn't have an exhibit building line-item budget for probably 10 years.

Lori Arnold: This is the first time I've heard this story. I used to visit the museum during those times and as a visitor, bringing family and friends in, no one ever knew that the museum was struggling because everything worked beautifully. The museum always had new exhibits and apparently you were creating all these things and people did not even have a clue.

NE: Yeah, we were making things out of things we could find around here. The design area was like the bag lady's living room! My office was stacked to the ceiling with stuff and there was everything in there that you could imagine, from A to Z. But, we had just completed the renovation. 90% of the exhibition had been changed out and 90% of the stuff in that office went to the old exhibition.

LA: Oh my goodness, there were so many wonderful things to go through and to keep and find value in. And I can understand that to let go of some of the things would be very hard, knowing now that the museum was built for 20 years with anything you could find. So, I took on the job of – everything will be classified, reorganized, replaced and things that are just obsolete would have to go.

NE: What did you think when you first came here and I put you on the dinosaur project?

LA: I kind of thought you were a little delusional. I'm thinking, "How are you going to make a cave out of this? And how are things going to look real?" You gave me some pretty heavy-duty equipment to work with and I faked my way through the first day thinking, "I am not capable, I am not capable." I thought it couldn't be done and you taught me yes it can.

NE: Working here -- if and when I do retire – then I'll take away that I've had an opportunity to provide, for people, these environments. I could turn an area of the

museum into a primordial existence with moving dinosaurs and with flora and fauna from prehistoric times. But, the greatest thing is to see the people and how much they enjoyed it and watch the kids faces and to pass it on to someone like you – it's fulfilling.

LA: Well, Niles, you have taught me that it's all possible.

NE: Sure!

LA: If you can imagine it, you can create it. You can do it. And I'm so used to learning what you can't do and here I have found out – no, you can do anything. I love this museum. Mid-America Museum has brought so much joy into my life.

NE: This has been wonderful for me and I can't think of a better job anywhere and a better place than I could have had in my lifetime. It's awesome! Mid-America Museum rules!