

# HILLARY SPENCER

**S**he's the new CEO at The Bishop Museum of Science and Nature who brings extensive museum experience to the Bradenton institution. "I see The Bishop as the go-to resource for families in the region. It is a place for discovery, learning and discourse for audiences of all ages."





**T**he Bishop Museum of Science and Nature—"The Bishop" to locals—has a new CEO. She's a very new CEO as Hillary started her job in April and will be fully on board in person this

June. For this interview, the Zoom backdrop she chose was a pier jutting out into the water and it was based in reality. Hillary was in Pensacola, Florida, where she grew up and where she was temporarily living in her parents' home while easing into the job of running The Bishop.

So moving from "one Florida locale to another" as she puts it, meant that she had "informed consent" as she wryly calls it, about our steamy summers. Staying with her folks also meant she had help with her school-age children while she worked. Museum work has been the focus of her entire career. "My very first job was at the T.T. Wentworth State Museum and Historic Pensacola Village. I have always been a museum person," she explains.

Since her hiring, Hillary visited the Bishop Museum a few times, but adds that her board was "very generous" in allowing her to work remotely. But like so many of us, she's anxious to get to work, work with other people, and work in a place that doesn't have a Zoom background.

This CEO has spent her time talking with staff because, she explains, "My style of leadership is collaborative." She wants to "dig deep" and find out what the museum is expert at as well as examine all parts of the museum that was formed in 1946 as a humble, but eclectic collection that has become the multi-dimensional museum that it is today.

Hillary notes the 30% jump in admission in 2020 (yes, 2020) and, in her soft spoken way says, "I want [The Bishop] to be a national destination." to which she adds, "The museum had a visitor from every state in the country."

Prior to The Bishop, Hillary worked for a year at The Children's Museum of the Upstate in Greenville, S.C., as President and CEO. Before that, she served as director of Nomad Exhibitions, a company that specializes in developing and producing traveling exhibits for museums.

Perhaps most prominently, prior to Nomad she was Director of Operations for Global Business Development at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York for over ten years. In that position, Hillary managed operational infrastructure and business strategy for several museum properties, including the traveling exhibitions program.

In addition to her time at AMNH, Spencer has produced exhibitions with global partners including Papalote Museo del Niño in Mexico City; Parque Explora in Medellín, Colombia; Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria; Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris; Musée des Confluences in Lyon, France; National Museum of Natural Science in Taichung, Taiwan; and The Field Museum in Chicago. She is a board member for the International Committee for Exhibition Exchange (ICOM) and a Getty Leadership Institute alum.

Hillary's LinkedIn page states, "I am a museum leader committed to social justice narratives and models of co-creation and co-leadership in both content creation and structural change. I have extensive experience in business development with a global network, focusing on traveling exhibitions and resource exchange."

Museums and attractions all across the country are emerging from their COVID shutdown and The Bishop is no exception. As of this writing (late May) the Museum was open with limited capacity and timed entry. (Be sure to check their website for the latest news on hours <https://bishopsience.org>).

But Hillary is no stranger to The Bishop. She first visited The Museum in 2016 when the AMNH exhibition "Dinosaur Discoveries" was on loan to the Museum.

She was born in New York City, but grew up in Pensacola (her mom is a Florida native). She and her husband David, a software developer, have two children. Eamon just turned 12 and daughter Sigrid is 7 ½. Hillary earned a Master's degree in Art History from the City University of New York-Brooklyn College.

If you haven't heard of The Bishop, it's a multifaceted museum: there's the Parker Manatee Rehabilitation Habitat, the planetarium and the museum proper which has permanent and temporary exhibits. "The full-dome planetarium's Digistar 6 dual projection system and latest-generation software provide stunning views and allow for constant updating as new astronomy discoveries are found," says their website.

The Parker Manatee Rehabilitation Habitat (currently being refurbished and due to reopen in June) holds nearly 60,000 gallons of water, including a medical pool. Some 42 manatees have been rehabilitated at The Bishop. Fish and Wildlife first rescues injured manatees then they go off to the manatee hospital for more care. After they've been stabilized, they go to a second stage rehabilitation facility like The Bishop. The Bishop, "helps them finish rehabilitation, gain weight, recover from cold stress, a boat strike or red tide," Hillary explains.

Like so many museums of a certain age, The Bishop started with an individual who was a collector. The Museum was opened in 1946 at Bradenton Memorial Pier incorporating Montague Tallant's collection of Florida's First Peoples' pre- and immediate post-contact archaeological materials, and a small collection of other artifacts, objects and biological materials related to the history of southwest Florida and Manatee County. (Tallant was a hobbyist explorer who roamed Florida's many archaeological sites and amassed a large collection of artifacts.)

Having outgrown its space at the pier, construction started on a new facility at the present location which would include a larger aquarium pool as well as a Spanish Courtyard and planetarium. The new, expanded facility opened in October, 1966.

Hillary's predecessor was Brynne Anne Besio, who led the Bishop Museum of Science and Nature for 13 years and retired in April of this year. She has been assisting in Hillary's transition.


Besio oversaw a rebranding and name change in 2019 from what was long known as the South Florida Museum, and the opening of the Mosaic Backyard Universe and the North Education Center—among many other accomplishments and changes.

The Bishop also has permanent and temporary exhibits. It's eclectic: from minerals, bones and fossils to the history of the construction of the Tamiami Trail, plus pioneer living and lots more including an imposing mastodon named Priscilla and is one of the largest mastodons ever found in North America. A very cool temporary exhibit, *From Badlands to Bradenton*, closes June 6.

"On July 8, we're opening our latest in-house exhibition, *Battles of the Boneless*. The comic book-themed exhibition focuses on carnivorous marine snails. Like *Badlands to Bradenton*, our staff created this special exhibition with objects from our collection, so you'll never see it anywhere else," she notes.

Their Mosaic Backyard Universe is designed for kids of all ages who will find scale models of the solar system and a freshwater pond filled with turtles and lots more to explore.

Museums like The Bishop tell the story of a community. So many of us are transplants and don't think, let alone know, about who came before us. By no means a musty collection of objects, the museum is dynamic and makes science relevant and, well, fun. Its role in teaching children in particular is vital.

A mom herself and an obvious lover of science, culture and learning, Hillary has this to say about her new position, "I see The Bishop as the go-to resource for families in the region. It is a place for discovery, learning and discourse for audiences of all ages. What I want to really lean into is The Bishop's commitment to early childhood education. Our Mosaic Backyard Universe is a fantastic learning environment for our young scientists-in-training. My seven year old daughter is enrolled in Science Camps all summer at The Bishop. The same experiences I value for her, I want to build for the community at large. This is our home now, and we want to help make it the best community it can be." 

STORY: Louise Bruderle  
IMAGE: Evelyn England



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