

## **Transcript of Interview with Ninia Zannieri by Hailey Philbin**

**Interviewee:** Ninia Zannieri

**Interviewer:** Hailey Philbin

**Date:** 07/31/2020

**Location (Interviewee):** Boston, Massachusetts

**Location (Interviewer):**

**Abstract:** Hailey Philbin interviews Ninia Zannieri from the Paul Revere Memorial Association about how COVID-19 affected the operation of the Paul Revere House.

**Hailey Philbin 0:01**

Alright. How are you doing?

**Ninia Zannieri 0:04**

Well, pretty good, actually. You know, it's...pretty good is a relative term these days, I think. But all things considered, we're holding our own.

**Hailey Philbin 0:18**

Good, good. Okay, well I will just jump into some of the questions, I guess. So, and with these, you might have other things you want to add about the house or you might not be able to answer a question or something like that, but feel free to add in whatever you think describes what's going on best at the house. So if you could, just briefly, state the organization that you work for and the position that you have at the organization.

**Ninia Zannieri 0:45**

Okay. I'm Nina Zannieri. I'm the Executive Director of the Paul Revere Memorial Association, and we own and operator the Paul Revere House and a few additional historical properties in Boston.

**Hailey Philbin 0:58**

Great. Okay, so I wanted to you ask you first, this is kind of the first question I ask everybody is, what is the status of your organization right now? So is it open? I know you guys are in the process of reopening if you could just describe that status right now.

**Ninia Zannieri 1:15**

We reopened [video buffering with unstable internet connection] on, for crying out loud. Sorry my phone just-

**Hailey Philbin 1:22**

You're good.

**Ninia Zannieri 1:25**

-Okay, we reopened on July 15th. The city of Boston was held back a week, other museums opened a week earlier. So we opened quietly on July 15th. We didn't advertise it. We just wanted to try and see what would happen. And we ran for a couple of days, and it seemed pretty good

and then we announced publicly that we were open effectively the following Wednesday. But we essentially had four days of trying it out.

**Hailey Philbin** 1:57

What were those four days like?

**Ninia Zannieri** 2:00

Well, you know, I think it was both slower and busier than we expected. I mean, it's so slow compared to what we would normally do that it was kind of shocking, but the fact that we had visitors was good news. So, I was kind of torn by how I felt by it. We also had very little bad behavior. I mean, all the visitors seemed thrilled that we were open. We didn't have any push back on masks. We had a little push back on contact tracing, which we could talk a little bit about why we think that is, but people were, visitors were great. And I will say the staff here, and I think we did a good job of reaching out and being in touch through the hiatus. We did pay everyone. And then when we were getting ready to open, we started that discussions a month before, and we said, "Here's what we're thinking about doing." So I think the staff was also ready. And so they weren't nervous, that they had been nervous, they might have telegraphed that to visitors, but the visitors all seemed to have a really good time, so we thought it went well.

**Hailey Philbin** 3:23

Good. Yeah, and I wanted to touch on the visitors you guys had. Did you find that they were mostly tourists or residential people?

**Ninia Zannieri** 3:32

You know, it was a mixture, but I would say it was more heavily tourist than we expected. But it was people who would say things like "We're from Florida, but we've been up in Maine for a month and now we're working our way down." There were some people that just got off planes, that we know. We also had local people, so it was a mixture, probably more heavily outside Massachusetts, but some of that was New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, so that sort of chunk we identify with as being New England even though parts Mid-Atlantic.

**Hailey Philbin** 4:18

Yeah. Sure. Well, I remember when I worked there, how busy it was in the summer. You know, and how different that will be for you guys this summer. Yeah, it's wild.

**Ninia Zannieri** 4:19

Yeah, we're running about 10% of what we would see.

**Hailey Philbin** 4:27

Okay. That makes sense. I mean, better than zero, but yeah normally you're so crowded.

**Ninia Zannieri** 4:42

No, absolutely better than zero.

**Hailey Philbin** 4:45

Okay, so I'll move on to my next question, which a lot of these questions touch on the same topic, so you might answer them, but just clarifying that part, I guess, with these questions. How has the pandemic affected your co-workers and employees? You sort of touched on this. And what roles are, how have the roles of all of your employees changed during the pandemic? So I guess everybody from your role all the way to everybody that's there all the time and the people that the Museum Interpreters.... if you could touch on that, that would be great.

**Ninia Zannieri** 05:19

Well, I mean, I think everyone is a little bit shell shocked. This came, I mean, we were running pretty normally, on March 10th, and on March 13, we were closed and everything shut down. So I think every [audio skips] and then the whole hiatus created a sort of a, discombobulated isn't a great word, but that's how we all felt. I mean, I think people are a little shell shocked. So there's that whole thing that we're all still dealing with, it's, you know, it's frightening, it's uplifting, when you get things right. Financially, it's worrisome for us. But one of the things that I think, as a director, I learned when we were building our visitor center, was that I'm better when I take the time to include the full team. And that's been a lesson for me, because I tend to want to just get things done. And sometimes I would sort of plunge ahead and get things done, or I don't want to bother someone. And that experience, which is now, you know, five years ago, I think helped me make sure that as we went through this difficult moment, the senior staff, we had a phone call every week, we touched base, we had people coming in to check the buildings. So we had a person coming in and reporting back, and including them in both the financial mess, but also, our decisions as we move forward. What are we going to work on while we couldn't go in? What are we going to do when we started back again? And Kristin did a great job, I think, of reaching out to the part time staff, keeping them informed. And then again, including them in the decisions; we had a meeting via Zoom and said, "Here's what we're thinking of, what do you think?" You know, "Does that scare you? Does that sound safe? What are you concerned about? What are other, you know, if you're working other places, what are they doing that we could do that might make you feel safer?" So it really, I mean, I think we did a really great job of doing that. And while we were out of here, we debuted the Revere Express, which is a blog, we pushed ahead with Revere House Radio, which is a new program for us. And, you know, Robert, who's our new research director did a great job of really pushing that along and making that happen, reaching out to part time staff and saying, "Do you want to write a blog? Do you want to be part of that?" So you know, it's, I've been here a long time, and I've been through a lot of ups and downs, both of our own making and external. And this is brutal. This is really brutal.

**Hailey Philbin** 08:24

Yeah, for sure. I mean, it changes the whole system. Yeah. Well, so I guess you sort of started to talk on this with the blog posts and the radio. The next question is sort of how has your your relationship changed with your typical audience? So if you want to, you know, take that with how have you advertised it really to tourists? Or have you not? Or... yeah, touch more about the, the radio and, and the the blog that would be great.

**Ninia Zannieri** 08:53

Yeah, I mean, I think we, you know, in some ways, because our attendance was so high, there were times when we sat back on our heels, because it was sort of like, well, they're just going to come in. And it also took a lot, takes a lot of time to serve 300,000 visitors.

**Hailey Philbin** 09:10

Sure.

**Ninia Zannieri** 09:11

We didn't always have the time to do some of the things that we had identified in our new strategic plan that we wanted to do. We know we have a lot of great content. And we felt that we weren't getting that out broadly enough. And so the pandemic gave us the moment to really get into producing blog posts, which we really wanted to do and hadn't been able to do. And now we have this really robust, you know, piece that's going to be there.

**Hailey Philbin** 09:40

Yeah.

**Ninia Zannieri** 09:41

I think we also are all realizing that no matter whether you're a little institution or a big one, whether you serve lots of visitors or a few, anything that you can do remotely is going to be good even when you're back to full capacity. It allowed you to get out, too. And I think that that, the thing we never had time for we now know we need to take the time for, and we know that virtual programs that we create now, we have to make sure that there are going to work for COVID remote and real world remote, which will be different. It's, it's, we've had this discussion with teachers, teachers who need materials for kids to use at home, are looking for something different than for what they would use in the classroom. It's a completely different situation because in the classroom, they control the situation.

**Hailey Philbin** 10:45

Right.

**Ninia Zannieri** 10:45

Remotely, they don't know what little Johnny's doing. I mean, he could, you know, have a cardboard cutout of himself up there.

**Hailey Philbin** 10:52

Right.

**Ninia Zannieri** 10:53

So we're trying to develop things that aren't just to solve a moment in time's problem, but things that have long term use.

**Hailey Philbin** 11:06

Yeah.

**Ninia Zannieri** 11:06

So that's real, both a challenge, and I think something that has really supported our need to keep the staff on and working.

**Hailey Philbin** 11:21

Yeah, definitely. Well, I know that you guys also had a lot of great education programs where you brought in, you know, the reenactors, and stuff like that. How has that changed? Like, are you guys trying to do virtual education programs? Or what's the long term look like for those kinds of things?

**Ninia Zannieri** 11:38

Well, I think because, because most of the reenactors, who come in are folks who are, do it, well, there are few who do it professionally, but a lot of them do it as a hobby. And so we haven't really started that back up yet, because we're not sure what the state rules about performance are. There's some question as to the definition of a performance, and we just don't want to get out on a limb anywhere. But we have talked about inviting a few of our performers say, Judith, who does Rachel Revere, or Michael Page who does Paul Revere, we might have paid them to do small clips that will be embedded in a school program. We haven't completely thought that through. And, but we do have some funds that were identified for those programs, that the funder seemed to be willing to let us reprogram for use in a virtual format. So we haven't really gotten that completely thought out yet. That's really something that the education department is thinking about right now, how we put those packages together.

**Hailey Philbin** 12:53

Yeah, that's great. And then, you know, obviously, the Paul Revere House is a huge part of the North End community of the Boston community as a whole. So I was wondering, how has the house sort of interacted with local organizations? And maybe initiatives during this time, have you benefited from it or worked with it, local businesses, anything like that?

**Ninia Zannieri** 13:15

Well, you know, I've always felt that the North End was both one of our greatest assets. And it's also where we live. We don't really all live here, but it's where we live institutionally. And we've always worked very hard to keep our relationship with the North End as one of neighbors. And that has served us well for many years, it served us well, when we were developing the visitor center where we required some zoning relief and other things, very- a lot of support. I think we're viewed as an institution that is an asset and a good neighbor. And so during this particular time period, and you know, I was coming in about once a week and someone else was come-, you know, other people were rotating in, and I'd run into people in the neighborhood, business people. And, you know, we'd chat on the sidewalk, talk about what they were doing, what were their plans to reopen, how were they doing, how were their families. And as unsettling as it was, it made me feel good that we were recognized in that way. And I will say that I- a number of restaurant owners said to me, "When are your reopening?" Because they reopened first. "What can we do to help? We want to know when you reopen so we can send people to you" And I'm thinking, I'm so glad the restaurants are open because when people call and say, "Well, what else is there to do?" I can say, "Well, you know, after you go to the Revere House, you've got all these great places you can eat in the North End," and they're like, "Oh, that's great. There's places to eat, how wonderful." So it's really a symbiotic relationship and always has been, it doesn't mean that there haven't been times when the North End has complained about, "Oh those tourists plugging the sidewalks." You know, there's always that sort of hearing stuff that goes on in any

community. But in general, it's really reinforced for me how, how good it is that we have always viewed ourselves as part of a community.

**Hailey Philbin** 15:37

Yeah, that's wonderful. Well, and you're also part of the Freedom Trail community, how have you guys worked with other sites on the Freedom Trail? Has there been some sort of cohesiveness a lot like across the trail with opening or, you know, at least protocols or anything like that?

**Ninia Zannieri** 15:55

Well, one thing I will say about the museum community, both nationally and New England-wide, is that it's always been true the museum community that while we compete, like dogs in the street sometime, when something like this happens, there is a huge amount of generosity and sharing of plans and protocols and concerns and all kinds of things. I mean, I, at the very beginning, was meeting with some senior New England directors who I've known for a million years. The, NEMA (New England Museum Association) arranged that, and we would have a conversation. The Freedom Trail sites were all talking as a group. There was another group of just people from across the country who got hooked up through other channels, who were- we were hearing what was happening in Texas, because Texas reopened sooner, they shared their, their protocols for how to reopen, it was great, it was- it gave us a place to start. I'm good friends with Ellie Donovan at Plymouth Plantation are now Plymouth Putuxet, and oh, my goodness, she shared a document with me that was so helpful. And just that level of back and forth. And just really, I mean, just to be able to talk to your colleagues and admit that you haven't a clue how you're going to get out of this hole, or you just don't know, is it, does it make sense to open, is it not safe to open, and all those concerns and be able to talk openly with people who you trust and have known is, it's really a great thing. I think along the Freedom Trail, what surprised me was we didn't open- we closed together, but we didn't open together. We, all doors at the Paul Revere House opened about the same time. They have since closed again.

**Hailey Philbin** 18:09

Okay.

**Ninia Zannieri** 18:10

And then Revolutionary Apaces, which is Old State (House) and Old South (Meeting House), they opened earlier this week, and the Constitution Museum (USS Constitution Museum) and the ship, and the whole Navy Yard area open today. So it was sort of a rolling open. And the Freedom Trail foundation is not doing any walking tours. The park service, I think is doing very limited walking tours, almost no walking tours happening that I can see; there are a few handful of people who are doing them but not very many. So the good news is, we're sort of open along the Freedom Trail. The bad news is that it's not uniform. But I completely respect the fact that an institution might open and say, "It's not worth it. We can't afford to do it."

**Hailey Philbin** 19:07

Right.

**Ninia Zannieri** 19:07

Or, "We're afraid to do it." I mean, we all have to make our own decisions.

**Hailey Philbin** 19:13

Yeah, I mean, that's important, because as you mentioned, yeah, completely different the way you work, the kind of tours you give, it's different. So that's- it's good that you guys can, can respond differently to this. With that and your role, specifically, how has fundraising development change for the Paul Revere House? You know, those those processes have to be different. You don't have events to hold. Yeah, if you could explain how that's changed for you.

**Ninia Zannieri** 19:45

Well, the thing that's actually saving us now is the fact that developing the visitor center forced us to do a major capital campaign. And we've always raised money, but because our earned income was so high, we haven't raised money in the sort of, in the way that a lot of institutions do. So going into that capital campaign, we really had to build a donor base, we built it from the, you know, from the ground up. The fact that we have that donor base now, is helping us with fundraising. And so we really, that's, that's twice that that has really helped us. We, we came out of the capital campaign in 2016, and we ran annual appeals in 2016, 2017 '18, and '19. So we already had some donors who we knew we could go to. And that's really been helpful for us to be able to reach out to individuals or foundations who we've worked with in the past. It's a very tough fundraising climate because every one is in the line, everyone. And so, you know, we, we've raised about, if you include our PPE loan, which we got, if you include that, we've raised about \$320,000 in the last four months.

**Hailey Philbin** 21:28

Wow. That's wonderful.

**Ninia Zannieri** 21:30

And that's shocking for us. I mean, that's if you had told me that I would have said, "Well, you're, you're nuts. We couldn't possibly do that, out of a campaign, outside of a campaign situation." But we have a matching grant, a challenge grant. And we really need to raise another 200,000 before the end of the year. That's kind of where we are. And that will probably put us in a small deficit but not anything that's horrifying. I mean, we were looking at a potential \$600,000 deficit.

**Hailey Philbin** 22:15

Wow.

**Nina Zannieri** 22:16

And that's horrible. I mean, that's just horrible. So we've, we've backed our way out of that. And we're, you know, we're trying to get ourselves to a reasonable spot this year. But I think next year is going to be another, it's gonna be really tough-

**Hailey Philbin** 22:36

Yeah, yeah.

**Ninia Zannieri** 22:37

-for everyone.

**Hailey Philbin** 22:37

Yeah. How do you think, I mean, there's no way to know, but how do you think, you've touched on some long term thing, but yeah, what do you see for the next four months or whatever for you guys?

**Ninia Zannieri** 22:48

Well, I think for those next four months, I don't see us seeing our attendance improve much beyond where it is. Our capacity would be about 300 people a day, and right now we're doing about 150 a day. So we've got some room, but I think in the fall, it's going to dip down, who knows if we'll have a resurgence when we get close back down. So anything that comes in and in my budget, anything that comes in from shop sales, programs, or admissions is gravy. It's become such a small number, that that's not where my focus is. That's so ironic, because normally it's the opposite.

**Hailey Philbin** 23:33

Right.

**Ninia Zannieri** 23:33

Just the opposite.

**Hailey Philbin** 23:34

Right.

**Ninia Zannieri** 23:35

But I do think that 2021, if we don't see any relaxation in capacity, travel restrictions, I mean, even if it were to improve to half of what we normally got, that would be a huge improvement. But I just, I just don't think any of us know, and a lot of the government sources that are COVID relief related are going to go away. Some of the state and city funding that goes to cultural institutions may go away with tight state and city budgets.

**Hailey Philbin** 24:19

Yeah.

**Ninia Zannieri** 24:19

So cultural institutions could be, I hate to even say this, in a worse position in 2021 trying to operate fully, but having less access to resources.

**Hailey Philbin** 24:36

Wow.

**Ninia Zannieri** 24:37

I- I'm, I'm very nervous about 2021. I'd like to be proven wrong, but I'm really nervous about it.

**Hailey Philbin** 24:45



Yeah, that's an interesting perspective. Well, I guess to sort of lighten the mood. I'll have my last question here. What do you guys think you- you've done best during all of this? Obviously, there are so many struggles and struggles are sort of similar across cultural institutions. But what has the Paul Revere Memorial Association, of everybody that works there, what have you guys done the best? Again, you've, you've touched on this, but what are you most proud of that you guys have done?

**Ninia Zannieri 25:12**

Well, I'm not going to limit myself to one. But I'm really proud of the way the staff has responded. And I'm going to say, I rarely would say something like this, but I'm, I'm kind of proud of myself. I've been here a long time. This was not how I expected to spend my, you know, until I retire moment. You know, we were, we were set up to do some big projects. We were in a great financial place. And this came, and I could have let it just spiral me down. But you know, this, everyone was so good and so responsive, the board has been good, the staff has been good. And I, you know, it helped me, but I also remembered why I chose to do this in the first place. And I just wasn't going to let this beat me. But there was a moment where I just thought, "Holy heck, I just, I don't want to do this. I don't want to do this anymore. Why am I doing this? This is ridiculous." But sort of got over that. I think the content that we've put out is spectacular. I think it's great. I think it will serve the institution. Well, for years to come. I think it can be repackaged and used to generate revenue, we just have to be creative about that. And we also kept an eye on the buildings. I mean, there were a few institutions that said, "Oh, no, no one's allowed to go- even go in the buildings. That's, you know, the governor said no one in." And I said, "I don't think that's what he means." I said, "I don't think the governor is saying, you can't go in and check to make sure the Paul Revere House doesn't have a major leak, hasn't had something break." We had a furnace issue while we were out that we caught and fixed. We had a leak that happened while we were out that we fixed. And so we- we've kept our commitment, even with tight finances, we've kept our commitment to making sure that the buildings are kept up. And that means spending some maintenance dollars that, you know, in some ways, I don't feel like we have, but I think we have to so I think the institution has really tried to keep its commitment to the valuable properties and collections that we have while knowing that we're in a really tight financial spot.

**Hailey Philbin 28:04**

Yeah, well, I've tried to follow what you guys have been putting on social media and the blogs and the radio, and it just seems like you guys have really taken advantage of this sticky situation. And it's really wonderful to see that for sure.

**Ninia Zannieri 28:17**

Well, I'm glad you mentioned social media, because, because Emily really has done a great job of trying to keep it timely and responsive. And we've used it to promote every new blog, every new Revere House Radio episode that drops, so folks, you know, everybody really stepped up. And as I say that, that's something that's a matter of pride for me in terms of people really, you know, they've, they've earned their salaries and more while we've been, we've been out, but yeah.

**Hailey Philbin** 28:54

Your guys' responses is a huge reason why I wanted to interview you for this because it just seems that you guys figured out a way to keep going in an amazing way. So I'm proud to see that.

**Ninia Zannieri** 29:06

You know, it's, there were times in the past when you know, something difficult would happen. And I would think, "Oh, this is the most complicated thing I'll ever have to deal with." But I think this pandemic is probably going to be on everybody's list for quite some time because it's just so unpredictable. And you, you don't have control of your destiny for more than two minutes.

**Hailey Philbin** 29:31

Right, right. Yeah. You never know what's gonna happen the next week, so how can you plan a month ahead of time? Yeah. Well, I'm all done with my questions, but I wanted to give you an opportunity to share any more that I haven't asked about or touch on stuff a little bit more. If you don't, then we can end here but want to give you that time.

**Ninia Zannieri** 29:52

Yeah, I, I think it's really great that we're keeping through, through your project, and I think some other's, and we're certainly doing it, institutionally. Keeping a record of what happened, we went back in our records to see if we could figure out what was going on in the Paul Revere House in 1918 and 1919 during the Spanish Flu. And the- the minutes from the board- from the annual meetings are so brahmin, you know, they'll say something like, "This was a difficult year," or, you know, something very nebulous, and you say, "But tell us what really happened." You know, and so I think that we've learned, as I hope as historians and public historians that 50 years from now, people will want to know what we were doing. I mean, we have a sign that has all our COVID rags, that's going into the collection when we're done with it. We did branded masks that, say, the Paul Revere House, and we've put it to the collection because we, you know, not only do we want to have a little fun with it, but we also want folks to be able to look back and get a sense of how did we function because we know we're curious about those other moments.

**Hailey Philbin** 31:14

Right.

**Ninia Zannieri** 31:15

And we don't, we just don't know, you know, there just isn't much record left behind. You know, we even look to see what happened during the the molasses flood. I mean, did the Revere House say, "Oh, we closed because there was a big boom in a bad smell." No, nothing, not a thing.

**Hailey Philbin** 31:33

Oh, my gosh. Wow.

**Ninia Zannieri** 31:34

So it's- our own frustration and looking back, I hope is making us a little better about keeping track of, of these moments. So thank you for doing your part to collect this information. I think it's, I think it'll be a lot of fun for people to get some personal input on, on what it was like.

**Hailey Philbin** 31:58

Right. It's so important, because when this is happening to the whole world, it's still so personal and so intimate. And so it's wonderful to hear what individuals are doing, what individual institutions are doing. Yeah, really important stuff, for sure. All right. Well, with that, I think, unless you have anything else to add.

**Ninia Zannieri** 32:17

No. I'm good.

**Hailey Philbin** 32:18

Good. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this. It's great to see you again and to hear about the house. I'll definitely stop by now that I know it's fully functioning.

**Ninia Zannieri** 32:28

And if there's anything else we can do for you, let us know we're here.

**Hailey Philbin** 32:33

Wonderful. All right. Thank you so much, Ninia.

**Ninia Zannieri** 32:36

Thanks Hailey.