

Biddeford arts organization Engine hires a new director

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Engine, the decade-old community catalyst in Biddeford that focuses on the arts, has hired a new executive director with experience in metro Boston as an artist, administrator, curator and community builder. Jessica Muise of Waltham, Massachusetts, will begin her duties in Biddeford on Feb. 1, after emerging from a field of about 75 applicants.

She will replace Engine's founding director Tammy Ackerman, who announced her departure in the spring.

Muise, 34, currently works at the New England Foundation for the Arts in Boston, where she specializes in understanding the creative economy and its role in community-building. She's also worked as membership and outreach director at Artisan's Asylum, a large-scale community space in Somerville, and as visual arts manager at the Umbrella Arts Center in Concord. She is the treasurer for CraftMass, a nonprofit organization that supports creative communities, and volunteers at Boston University's BUild Lab, which focuses on arts and social impact.



Jessica Muise will begin her job as executive director of Engine in Biddeford on Feb. 1. *Eric Leone*

She was raised a dancer and has a bachelor's degree from New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study in dance in education as transformative pedagogy. Her personal work focuses on making dance in public spaces, including parking lots, fields and rooftops. Muise also recently completed the Executive Program in Arts & Culture Strategy at University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice.

Her decision to move to Maine, she said, was motivated by Engine's role in Biddeford's rebirth as a vibrant artistic community. "I applied because Engine is focused on transformation," she said in a phone interview Monday. "That is fundamentally what the mission is, and that is the reason I am here on the earth, to help others have the experience of transformation – of themselves and their communities. Engine has really shown how the arts can be used as a community development tool and be a catalyst for other development. The arts are central to our economies. Whether we speak about it as the creative economy, arts and culture are core to why we want to live in a place."

Stephen Burt, the longest-serving board member at Engine, helped lead the search for Ackerman's replacement. He said Muise's combination of skills as an administrator and her sensibilities as an artist helped her emerge from the field. Plus, she has a lot of energy and enthusiasm.

"To delve into the world of arts, you have to understand the artistic process or you are going to be outside of the loop. She understands how artists work, and can speak to them. She also understands how administrators work, so when it comes down to the fiscal bottom line she makes that happen as well," Burt said. "(Her hiring) is taking us to the future. That is the executive director's job, to guide us in a way that is responsible and takes advantage of the growing arts community in Maine. Where it goes exactly will be in part up to her and the board, but we want to see Engine grow and thrive and have a strong fiscal foundation."

In an interview, Muise said the pandemic has created the opportunity for her to arrive at Engine during a time of transition and take a measure of the community. She will fill her early months on the job listening to artists, board members and others in the community. Engine soon will embark on a new strategic plan, a process that will include discussion and debate about its permanent home. Engine has occupied three locations in Biddeford in 10 years, including its current home at 165 Main St. It has discussed working with a partner to develop the Marble Block Building on Main Street, which it would like to occupy as its long-term or permanent home.

More immediately, the organization will have to decide how and when to begin gathering again, what those gatherings will look and feel like, as well as the long-term role of digital programming.

She also is eager to talk to artists about their work during and after the pandemic. The process of creating art, whether a dance, a painting or any other kind of personal expression, is the process of personal storytelling, she said. "We rely on artists to inspire us and help us imagine our future and have hope and joy for the that future," she said. "The COVID crisis has been challenging and devastating to some, and we don't know what impact it will have on our lives as we move forward. Artists and creatives will help us make sense of what is happening and will help us dream again. Artists will help make meaning of all that has been happening to us. It is the unique role of artists to give voice and give form to that."

The pandemic also has exposed the vulnerability of the arts and artists, and Engine's work will involve making the arts more secure, she said. Part of that effort involves education and advocacy, and Muise said her recent work with the creative economy team at the New England Foundation for the Arts will serve her well at Engine. "My experience at NEFA involves looking at the higher level of research, data and tracking to understand the

creative economy, but what I have the most experience in is convening folks who want the same outcome. They love their community and they want the very best for it, and they want it to be a place that is thriving,” she said.

That means bringing together planners, builders, citizens, artists, designers and others to find the common sweet spot for progress. “That is where the magic happens, in that collaborative envisioning. That to me is what the creative economy is all about,” she said.

In addition to her other experience, Muise has certificates in permaculture design and master gardening, and has served as an adviser to Boston Advocates for Dance, Boston Children’s Museum and several other organizations, and is a member of the Boston Community Leaders Fellowship.

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