

Jon Bernstein:

Welcome to PNC C-Speak: The Language of Executives. I'm Jon Bernstein, regional president of PNC Bank in New England, here with my co-host, Carolyn Jones, market president and publisher of the Boston Business Journal.

Carolyn Jones:

Thanks, Jon. It's great to be with you on PNC C-Speak. Each podcast features local executives talking about relevant and timely business topics. This knowledge sharing platform showcases leaders with forward-thinking approaches that disrupt the status quo and cause us to think differently.

Jon Bernstein:

Our guest today is Vikki Spruill, president and CEO of the New England Aquarium. Welcome, Vikki. It's great to have you with us today.

Vikki Spruill:

I'm thrilled to be here. Thank you, Jon and Carolyn.

Jon Bernstein:

We'd like to start off with some background about the scope and size of the organization you lead. Please tell us about the New England Aquarium, a place so many of us visit and enjoy the greater scope of the work you do.

Vikki Spruill:

Well, first and foremost, the New England Aquarium is an ocean conservation organization. Many people think of us as a tourist destination, but our mission is working for a vital and vibrant ocean for all. And of course, through our main campus on Central Wharf, we hope to inspire everyone to form a deeper connection with the ocean and take action to protect it.

So our main building is obviously one way we do that, through exhibits and educational opportunities and discovery and the wonder about animals and habitats. But beyond our walls, we're also doing a lot more, and that's the part that I actually came to the New England Aquarium to highlight and spotlight.

Carolyn Jones:

And so Vikki, you were at the helm of the aquarium during the pandemic, which there was a lot written about, the impact, the challenges that you faced during that time. Can you share some of those stories with us?

Vikki Spruill:

Yeah. Like so many cultural institutions in this city and everywhere actually, we were deeply impacted by the pandemic. Our main revenue source of course comes from ticket sales and events, and when we were closed to the public, all of that halted. It certainly, as a CEO, made me think much more deeply about our business model, which is heavily reliant on retail aspects of our work.

During that time though, we had to maintain a staff of about 35 to 40 people to take care of the animals because unlike some other institutions, we couldn't just close our doors and walk away. So the work continued in the main building, caring for about 10,000 animals year round and 24/7. In our turtle hospital out in Quincy, our rehabilitation work continued, our educational work continued virtually. It's hard to

remember this, but we were one of the first organizations to develop online curriculum to help all the parents homeschooling at that time.

But since then and during then we were very fortunate to receive grants. We took a Main Street loan, we got maximum amounts of PPP loans. Boston's philanthropic community was incredibly generous to us. One person told me at the time, "You are like Fenway, we can't let the New England Aquarium go down." That was a bucket list comment I received.

Now we're back. I mean that's I think the silver lining of this is 2023 was very strong. Visitors have come back beyond 2019 numbers, which is really exciting. We've got four penguin chicks, two new sea lions, and a nurse shark. Lots of good things are happening.

Carolyn Jones:

That's terrific.

Jon Bernstein:

I'd love you to give us a little bit of the size and scale of the work you're doing inside the aquarium and then also some of the items that you're doing outside the aquarium.

Vikki Spruill:

Yeah, wonderful. And thank you for that question because I think we are underestimated. Perhaps it's because we're in Boston and everyone doesn't like to talk about themselves here. So I'll do that on behalf of the New England Aquarium. We are a beloved iconic institution in this city. We will be celebrating our 54th birthday in June. It's all the good and bad things of being 54. We've had to do facelifts for our building just like many others do.

But we are a mission-driven institution. We're a nonprofit. We have about 290 employees and another 3 or 400 volunteers. Our annual budget is around 50 to \$55 million, and we have two campuses which people don't always know. We have of course our main building on Central Wharf downtown, and then we have our turtle rescue hospital out in Quincy Massachusetts in the shipyard. That one is not open to the public.

And this gets to the things we're doing outside of the aquarium that most people come to visit. In Quincy, we have a larval fishes program where we are actually rearing fish for exhibition. So about 60% of the species you'll enjoy seeing in the giant ocean tank inside of the aquarium are cultured by us out in our Quincy facility. And you might wonder why is that relevant? Well, if we can do that, it's part of our sustainability footprint because that means we're not taking these animals from the wild.

We have just recently made our gift shop plastic free, which has been quite a feat. We have to walk the talk. So all of the plush toys, all of the things you see in the gift shop are plastic free, which is amazing. But what people probably don't know enough about is our dedicated research arm called the Anderson Cabot Center for Ocean Life. And that's where we are actually doing field work and scientific research. It guides things like the responsible use of the ocean, like providing solutions to ocean problems.

We launched an ocean tech incubator called BlueSwell where we're giving grants to early stage innovators for ocean solutions. We are influencing policy. We have a legislative agenda and a policy team working on things like a sea turtle rescue and rehabilitation act at the federal level, but also working with state legislators on a variety of ocean related things.

But we're involved in offshore wind innovations in aquaculture, the growing blue technology sector, lots of things because you can't have a healthy and vibrant and vital ocean if you are not thinking about the work actually in the wild. We have a global program that people don't understand or maybe just haven't heard about yet. It's called our Marine Conservation Action Fund where we're granting grants to support 200 conservation programs across 60 countries and six continents. We've been working on that for the

past 25 years. And then from that group, we select fellows who come to Boston, learn from us. We learn as much from them frankly. So we have this far-reaching global footprint.

So the hope is that you come to the main building, you're inspired, you're educated, you want to do more. We're gathering signatures to send to politicians. We are hoping that you leave the building better ready to take action to protect this beautiful ocean that we all love.

Jon Bernstein:

Thank you for that amazing work. Can you tell us how you brought your leadership philosophy to the role?

Vikki Spruill:

Yeah. Well, I think I was brought here to, and the board mandate to me was, make the whole greater than the sum of its parts. And I have a couple of mantras from the previous roles that I have held running a national philanthropic association and a major global ocean conservation NGO is that it all comes down to people, you have to honor and respect your people. And so I brought that with me.

I believe you've got to break down silos. And in an organization like ours, which has so many disparate parts under one roof, whether you're a ticket taker or the CEO or a marine mammal trainer or a field scientist or an aerial pilot or a penguin trainer, these are all really critical roles at the aquarium and we all need to understand each other and how we all drive and row in the same direction towards one set of strategic priorities and goals.

And so we've worked really hard since the pandemic on arriving at shared strategies all based on our values. We have a value that's called working at the speed of trust. And by that I mean we have to respect and trust one another if we are all going to understand that we each play a unique role in achieving our mission.

Carolyn Jones:

You mentioned earlier that you're passionate about ocean conservation and climate resiliency. What inspired that? And maybe share a little bit about your career journey as it relates to that.

Vikki Spruill:

I would say I spent the first part of my career in public affairs, strategic communications. I've been split between private sector and public sector. And I actually lucked out of the private sector to start a project for The Pew Charitable Trusts years ago that became really a communications firm for the NGO community advancing ocean issues.

I had wanted to be a marine biologist in high school. I lived in Pensacola, Florida at the time, and I had a science teacher who told me there was no place for women in science. He was a bit of a mentor to me. And as I look back over my career, that was a real important moment for me. It was a watershed moment for me because I pursued a liberal arts degree in communications, communication strategy, I wanted to be a journalist. And then I went into philanthropy and then ocean conservation.

So somehow at the New England Aquarium, it's all gotten woven together. So I've always had this deep passion for translating science. While I'm not a scientist myself, I believe that it's critically important for us to understand, for policymakers to understand, for journalists to understand. And so really that's where the passion comes from.

And when I got to Boston, I moved here from Washington, D.C., almost six years ago now, I was surprised that our own institution was not leaning in more heavily to the connection between climate and ocean. It is the ocean that drives our climate. And there we are sitting on Central Wharf where we observe

sea level rise and floods on a regular basis. I came in right after the big king tide and I was astounded by the stories.

And so, one of the first things I focused on was we've been studying these animals not only in our care but in the wild for 40 years, sharks, rays, right whales. We're the preeminent researcher on right whales actually in the country, maybe even in the world, longest running data set on where the right whales are going. And all of it's been impacted by climate change.

And then that naturally leads us to, this is another value of mine that I think I brought. Leading an institution like this is such a privilege and I believe we have to engage as civic leaders in the community. So I have taken a proactive external look at how can we contribute ourselves to a more climate resilient, accessible, and inclusive waterfront.

Jon Bernstein:

Yeah, critically important work, Vikki. Thank you for that. Working together at the speed of trust, what is your company doing to create a more diverse workforce and foster a culture that is inclusive and an equitable environment?

Vikki Spruill:

Well, I have a lot of feelings about this. I believe that an inclusive workforce starts with a commitment from the top, and that's from the CEO. And it has to be comprehensive and it has to be a program. And it's almost a belief system, a value, a credo, a commitment to everything in the organization, whether that's interview protocols or hiring procedures or training or leadership development or looking at growth opportunities or working on procurement standards.

So we have created a standing DEI committee of our board of trustees. We're actively engaging our staff at all levels. We're working on creating career pathways and expanding opportunities for people of color and women, those that have traditionally been or not been able to participate in STEM careers. It's ongoing work. This is not something you check off a list. A commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and really belonging is a life's journey.

Carolyn Jones:

We all learn from mentors and other people in our lives who impact us in so many ways. So what's some of the best advice that you've been given or perhaps picked up along the way? And then conversely, what's your advice for that next generation of leaders?

Vikki Spruill:

I wish I had pearls of wisdom. I've had so many mentors, some women, some men who believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. It just takes that person who sees a spark and gives you a chance. And I manage and lead much in the same way. I believe everyone has the capacity to do it, and sometimes we just don't give enough rope to let people shine.

But I would say you've got to constantly push your limits, but you have to know your boundaries. And I think women in particular maybe have learned this the hard way, but I think we are becoming much more clear about our boundaries and the workforce is more accepting of them. Absolutely build diverse teams. You do better work with diverse teams and they will help guide your thinking. Everybody knows this African proverb. I think it goes, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

And at the end of the day, it's just do what you love, do what you're passionate about. When I look back over the sequence of my career, it made absolutely no sense as I was going through it, the different roles I played except I was following a passion. And now that I look back, it made total sense.

Jon Bernstein:

That's an amazing story and perspective, Vikki. It's funny how common that is amongst us all, but that's a really ... You followed your passion and it's incredible. I also will say, I do remember your acceptance speech in 2022 when you received the Boston Chamber's Pinnacle Award. Your advice and perspective there was so powerful. I tried to take as many notes about it as possible.

Vikki Spruill:

Oh, thank you.

Jon Bernstein:

What other advice would you give to the next generation of leaders specifically?

Vikki Spruill:

I keep going back to understanding your purpose. You know what I think really is the most important attribute is self-awareness and humility. I think as senior leaders, as CEOs of organizations, it's pretty easy to let things go to your head and think you're actually in control. You're not in control. Everyone around you is really supporting you. So I often say I'm standing on the shoulders of so many other people. I think a leader's job is to help other people lead.

Carolyn Jones:

Definitely. That's great advice. As you've told us, you've had such an interesting career. I always feel that failure, not in a negative way, but failure can be truly a powerful teacher. And a lot of people say, some of the most successful people in the world say that, how many times you fail as a real secret to success. So what are some of the hard lessons that you've learned along the way that you could share with us?

Vikki Spruill:

Wow, there have been so many. I think I am passionate. You know when you get interviewed and they say, what are your strengths and what are your weaknesses? I feel like one is the flip of the other. In answering your question, I'll say that my passion sometimes is impatience and tenacity. And so I think what I've learned over my career is that you really can't push a culture faster than it can absorb. You can't push people faster than the culture around you can absorb.

And so much of what we've had to go through since the pandemic or always actually, because change is the only constant, you can't push people until you help them understand the context within which something is working. So I've probably pushed too hard and too fast, and that has resulted in failures.

I really think workplaces are ecosystems, and I'm making a comparison to obviously the ocean, but we have a sign in the Simons Theater that says, "Healthy marine life thrives on diversity and so do human societies." Workplaces are ecosystems, and we need to be as mindful of those relationships and connections in our own ecosystems as we do for the animals we care for in the wild. And I think sometimes we get, and I get too bogged down on metrics or outcomes or achievements, and I sometimes just don't let things unfold more naturally.

Jon Bernstein:

Workplaces as an ecosystem, a hundred percent agree with that. Really great-

Carolyn Jones:

Good observation and good advice for sure.

Vikki Spruill:

Everybody's got a role. You can't do one thing without the other.

Jon Bernstein:

Yeah. Vikki, you're really engaged in the business community in New England and in Boston. From your perspective, why is Massachusetts a great place to live, to work, and lead a business? And what troubles you or what do you think needs work and attention?

Vikki Spruill:

Gosh, so many things. First of all, this community, despite its reputation, has been so welcoming of me. I mean, I was immediately embraced by so many business leaders, and I'm not so sure that would happen in other cities. There's a pride here of being first in so many things. There's obviously the sports teams. There's so much community. In Washington, D.C., the first question you get is what do you do? In Boston, the first question you get is where do you live? And by that I mean neighborhood and where did you go to school and where did you go to high school? So there's a different level and depth of community that I haven't felt in my more transient army father life moving all around the world.

But we also have our challenges, retaining talent, housing, transportation. We have to work harder at keeping all these great minds that we put through the best institutions in the world through. They have to stay here. And as we all know, that's not the case, at least lately. And because this is, I think, the greatest challenge of our time, I think we need more collaborative and urgent approaches to climate resilience strategies. This gets to the things I think we need to work on.

I have been surprised as a major urban waterfront city, and we can all look out our windows and see the water or many of us can, and yet, if you've looked at some of the studies done, even with a category one flood, if nothing is done, by 2070, water will be all the way up to city hall. That is really alarming, and we have got to get serious about it.

I look at it, and I wasn't here for all these things, but you're notorious for this. Boston Harbor was challenge number one in cleaning it up. The Big dig and the beautiful green way we have now was challenge number two. And now I look at comprehensive waterfront strategies and planning as the next big conquest for this city. And we can't do it alone. We have to do it together. Water doesn't know one building taller than the other. And there are people having the conversations, but we don't have a lot of time to waste.

Carolyn Jones:

It really is a collective problem, one that we all hopefully can join hands and work together on. That is for certain, especially with leaders like you. We'd just like to learn a little bit more about you personally. Where do you find your personal motivation and inspiration? Where does that come from?

Vikki Spruill:

Well, both of my parents are deceased, but I have two amazing daughters who in their own ways have had convoluted job paths, but maybe it won't surprise you to hear that they're now both working in ocean conservation. So I think it's the family business. And I had nothing to do with it, but I get so much inspiration from listening and learning from them. It's gotten so bad that people used to ask my daughters, "Oh, is Vikki Spruill your mother?" And now it's the other way around. People say to me, "Are Caroline and Susannah your daughters?"

Carolyn Jones:

That's great. I love it.

Vikki Spruill:

I love that. And of course, I have a sister who is my soulmate and with whom I talk about everything. But mostly it's just family, intimate family.

Carolyn Jones:

That's wonderful. That's great.

Jon Bernstein:

We're all blessed to have that, family connections.

Vikki Spruill:

Yeah, it's really special, really special. And then there's the work family, and then there's the friends family and all of those things. But I rely on that unconditional love that only your children and your siblings and loved ones can give, and my dog.

Jon Bernstein:

Who hasn't barked yet.

Vikki Spruill:

He's been very good.

Jon Bernstein:

I'll be careful here. All right, Vikki, you ready? We like to close with some rapid fire questions. So here we go. What is on your bucket list?

Vikki Spruill:

Okay, so you might be surprised by this one, but I have never gotten scuba certified. It scares me. I'm a little bit claustrophobic, and it's not uncommon to feel that way, but I am starting a course to get scuba certified right now. So that's on my bucket list.

Jon Bernstein:

What are you currently reading or watching?

Vikki Spruill:

I'm the person who has three books going at the same time. I think two of them that I'm immediately and deep into, one is called Longpath by Ari Wallach. He has a PBS series on the future. He's a futurist. And the second one is a book called Black Sheep, how to be human in an humane world by a friend and author named Peter Sims.

Jon Bernstein:

Good books. What was your first job?

Vikki Spruill:

My first job, I was in high school and I taught etiquette to kindergartners and not just table manners, but boy, they left this little course knowing how to set a table and where the forks and knives and spoons go,

but how to answer the phone, how to, although that doesn't probably happen as much anymore, but how to answer the phone and how to write a thank you note. I'm a stickler for thank you notes. And then my first serious job was working for Burson-Marsteller public relations in Washington, D.C.

Jon Bernstein:

Who's a Boston leader or organization to watch?

Vikki Spruill:

There's so many, but I would say Nicole Obi, the president and CEO of the Black Economic Council of Massachusetts. I am really fortunate that she has joined the aquarium's board of trustees, and I just marvel at her ability to reach across and connect so many people in this city.

Jon Bernstein:

She's fantastic. We had her on a podcast earlier. She's great.

Vikki Spruill:

Yeah, amazing.

Jon Bernstein:

And finally, what's a wish you have for Boston?

Vikki Spruill:

That we protect ourselves from the onslaught of climate change before it's too late. And I don't want to leave on a downer, but all of this great work we're doing won't be possible if we don't protect this great city of ours.

Jon Bernstein:

And that wraps up another episode. Thank you so much for joining us, Vikki, and for sharing your insights.

Vikki Spruill:

I am so delighted to have had this opportunity to speak with you both. Thank you so very much for all you do for the city of Boston.

Carolyn Jones:

Thank you. That was a lot of fun and so insightful.

Jon Bernstein:

I'm Jon Bernstein.

Carolyn Jones:

And I'm Carolyn Jones. And this is PNC C-Speak: The Language of Executives. Our guest today was Vikki Spruill, president and CEO of New England Aquarium.

Jon Bernstein:

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