

StoryCorps Interview at the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami
Jillian Hernandez and Anya Wallace

Jillian: What brought you to MOCA for the first time?

Anya: I was working at a car dealership with my mom, answering phones, while I was still finishing my undergraduate work. And there was a billboard right in front of the car dealership for an exhibition at MOCA of the work of Yoko Ono, which I found interesting because I didn't really know that Yoko Ono was an artist in her own right. And, I was an art history major, so I was definitely interested in checking out the exhibition; I had never been to MOCA before, and I really enjoyed it. Like, you know the kind of conceptual artwork that she was making and just like this range of work that was really about having the view participate; she was dealing with feminist issues; she was addressing issues of war. Like, it really opened me up to not only her work but it just reminded me of, like, what I like about art—that it could be fun but also be critical. I think that was the first time I thought, "This would be a cool place to work."

Jillian: Tell us how you started. Timeline.

Anya: How I started at MOCA?

Jillian: Yes.

Anya: I remember calling the museum and asking them if they had any job openings and they said that they were needing a front desk person. And so I was answering phones two days out of the week and then assisting Adrienne von Lates, Dr. Adrienne von Lates, who was the curator of education then.

Jillian: You've always been a hustler, huh?

Anya: I try.

Jillian: Right from the start, you were like, "I need something else." So you were the front desk girl and part-time assistant to education. So what else happened?

Anya: So, eventually, I was brought out from the front desk to work full-time in the education department as Adrienne's assistant. One of the, kind of, mandates that I was given was to expand our outreach programming. I remembering being in the car and listening to NPR at one point, and there was a story about how the number of girls entering juvenile justice was increasing—at a much higher rate than boys. I, you know, immediately just kind of answered my question in terms of, you know, where could we do outreach. Well, there are all these girls entering the juvenile justice system, I wonder if they're getting any art classes, I wonder if they're getting any opportunity while they're in detention to do anything creative. And, not that I thought that, you know, there was this important message that would liberate these girls from anything, but more just a desire to engage and share space with girls who are in situations that I could have easily have been in—or that my friends were in. So I came up with the curriculum and Adrienne gave me some feedback that was really valuable—she actually came up with the name, Women on the Rise. The juvenile justice center was one of our first sites. I mean, it was kind of terrifying sometimes, especially when I first started because I didn't have this like super

clear-cut agenda other than, like, “let’s talk about this artist.” The conversations were great—sometimes they would hate the work and then I would feel really bad, but sometimes the conversations where they hated the work were sometimes one of the best conversations, like you know. Sometimes they loved it, sometimes they were confused by it; but, even in those reactions of like, “oh, miss, why is this lady naked?” you know, “why does she have blood on her?” “why is she so crazy?” Those moments not only kind of like showed me what the art can kind of teach the girls or whatever, but how the girls challenge what the work is, right; or like even what I think about what the work is or whatever. So, like, I think part of it—and I wasn’t thinking this consciously at all—but I think part of it was like, I know it feels good to write something, I know it feels good to make something, so, like, I want to give girls a space and a reason to do that.

Jillian: Mmmhmm.

Anya: This is an interesting moment for Women on the Rise in the sense that it’s ten years, now you’re running the program, maybe you can talk a little bit about what you think your signature would be on the program.

Jillian: I was a little scared, you know, first, when I first came here, about kind of leaving that life behind, leaving the girls behind. But, what really did click for me is just having this tool of art to be able to do with girls and to still have those same conversations, still talk about body image and sex and sexuality and all this stuff—but having art as a tool and not having to like hide it or dress it up as something else. That has really been, you know, what has gotten me so excited about being here.