

## BACK PAGE

## OUT OF THIS WORLD

FOR THIS NEW NONPROFIT LEADER,  
THE SKY ISN'T THE LIMIT

Q&amp;A

RACHEL BROWNLOW  
LUND  
Special to the Houston  
Business Journal

Following a national search, William T. Harris took the helm at Space Center Houston in early April as the nonprofit space museum's president and CEO. Harris has more than 30 years of leadership experience in the nonprofit sector, most recently including 16 years as senior vice president of development and marketing at the California Science Center Foundation.

His appointment at Space Center Houston takes place amid a period of rapid growth for the educationally focused museum, which opened in 1992 and is now quickly approaching 1 million guests a year. The Official Visitor Center of NASA Johnson Space Center, Space Center Houston plays an active role in advancing science, technology, engineering and mathematics-based learning by offering educational programs such as youth summer camps, Space Center University, permanent and traveling exhibits, and professional development opportunities for educators. The center generates a \$73 million annual economic impact and is the No. 1 international attraction in the greater Houston area.

**Space Center Houston conducted a national search to find its next president and CEO. What do you think set you apart from other potential candidates?**

The board was looking at how to really take this organization to a new level, and they recognized they had not invested in an advancement program that is building a base of philanthropic supporters. That's an area where I have great expertise. I've worked in advancement for 30 years. I've worked on all forms of fundraising from membership, annual giving, event fundraising, campaigns, principal gifts, major gifts, but also I've overseen programs and communications marketing, government affairs and board relations. So I was a match for the skills they were seeking in the next leader.

The other part that is so subjective and you can't predict, is chemistry. When I went through the process and met members of the search committee who were part of the executive committee of the board, we really shared the same values and our perspective on the opportunity here really aligned. We want to take Space Center Houston to a new level and make it the leading space and science-learning center in the world.

**How do you plan to accomplish that?**

I see Space Center Houston, like other science centers, as an essential part of the



## ► CLOSER LOOK

## WILLIAM T. HARRIS

President and CEO, Space Center Houston

Age: 56

Hometown: Greenfield, Massachusetts

Hobbies: Food, traveling, reading

Last book read: The Wright Brothers by David McCullough

Education: B.S. in psychology from Tufts University; certificates in development from The Fundraising Institute at Boston University School of Communications

JIMMY MORELAND/HBJ

educational infrastructure; and I think there are ways that this institution can serve the region and Texas that are really untapped.

**What untapped resources and strategies do you have in mind for growing the Space Center?**

The resources really will be inviting the nonprofit community to invest in our vision. Houston has an incredible legacy of civic investment – it has one of the premier symphonies in the nation and in the world, it has outstanding medical enterprises and other incredible cultural and educational institutions.

**Fundraising presents a huge challenge for so many organizations. What tips can you offer to individuals and organizations seeking monetary donations?** I think

there are some essentials that are pretty consistent, regardless of the size of the organization. First off, you have to know the values of the organization and be clear

about your mission, and your staff and board have to align behind that. The other essential ingredient is that whatever you do, you have to be really good at it because there are a lot of organizations out there seeking support. So it's about delivering on your promise.

**Describe Space Center Houston's company culture.** To the credit of Richard Allen, who has retired as the CEO, he and the team here have really engendered a spirit of family, a passion for our mission, and a real dedication to serving the public. Our team embraces lifelong learning and education. We really want you to feel welcome because if you feel welcome, you're going to be more open to learning.

**What do you foresee being the biggest obstacles you'll face this year in leading the space center?** One challenge is the board is ready to go – they're very excited and ready to run. But I think it's

important to carefully assess all of our options so we can best serve the public.

**Do you have any daily habits or rituals that contribute to your success?** I'm an avid lifelong learner, and I love to read. I think it's important to understand what's going on in the world and how you fit in the context of the world. So the first thing I do in the morning with my cup of coffee is read several newspapers and also check some online sources just to keep my finger on the pulse of what's going on – not only in the Houston area, but throughout the country and the world. I'm bilingual in Spanish, so I'll look at some of the Spanish-language sources as well to see how they're portraying the news.

**How did you first get involved in the nonprofit sector?** My family has always been very civic-minded. From the time I was a child, my father was on the board of the YMCA and my mom was an officer in the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), so we were always involved in civic activities and with our church. When I graduated from college, my best friend said, "Have you ever thought about the Peace Corps?" So I went with her to the meeting, and it really aligned with my aspirations in life. I served in the United States Peace Corps in Paraguay, and that really ignited in me a desire for a career in public service.

**What was your Peace Corps assignment in Paraguay?** I was placed 12 hours in the jungle, and I discovered in the region I was assigned to that there was a 50 percent mortality rate in children under the age of 5 from drinking contaminated water. At the time, the World Bank was offering challenge grants for storage and water filtration systems in rural communities in that region of the world. That's actually how I started in advancement. I had to organize a local community to manage the project after I left and also raise matching funds to bring clean water to the community. I saw the impact on the community, and I thought, "Wow. How can I keep improving the lives of others?"

**What is one business accomplishment that you're proud of?** One of the most satisfying measures is when you get a letter from a 10-year-old that talks about the emotional impact you've made on them through one of your exhibits or programs. I used to keep a file folder of them, and I would love to read those letters because it would underscore for me, "Wow. This is what it's all about. This is why I wake up every day and can't wait to get to work."

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*