SARAH SCHROTH, 64
Director, Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University

Sarah joined the staff at the Duke University Museum of Art – before it became the Nasher Museum of Art – as a curator in 1995 after a stint at the Ackland Art Museum at UNC. Following former director Kimerly Rorschach’s departure to become president of the Seattle Art Museum, Sarah stepped in as interim director in November 2012 and was named the Nasher’s chief executive in June 2013. Her husband, Nicholas Cariello, is a technical writer at NetApp. Her son, Joe, lives in Seattle.
What got you interested in pursuing a career as a curator?

I always wanted to be an artist when I was a little girl. But my second-grade teacher – it’s so funny – she told us that we weren’t supposed to mix colors in this landscape we were doing with crayons, and I was so busy concentrating on the clouds that I was making, I didn’t hear her say that. Of course, I mixed blue and white together and she gave me a D – bless her heart, I mean, if she only knew. (laughs) But it was supposed to happen. I wasn’t supposed to be an artist; I was supposed to be an art historian.

I majored in art history [at Mary Washington College]. I didn’t know there was such a thing as a field of art history when I went to college. I was going to be a speech therapist, and I took this one class and I just fell in love. I couldn’t believe you could get a major in just looking at artwork and reading about artwork.

Then I went down to Atlanta and taught at the Atlanta College of Art. I absolutely loved it, and I thought, “This is going to be my career.” I got my master’s in Atlanta, spent a year in Spain and then enrolled in graduate school at the Institute of Fine Art at New York University. While I was a student there, I got a job during a summer working for the first Spanish exhibition to be held in the U.S. in modern times, El Greco in Toledo. The man who was writing the catalog entries was in Dallas, and he got me down there for an internship at the Kimbell Art Museum.

That’s when I was introduced to museum work, and once I understood what people in museums do as curators, it was just too much fun.

What was the transition like for you switching from curator to director?

I’m starting to settle in; it’s starting to become less anxiety producing. (laughs) It is a big responsibility, but we’re lining up some really exciting things. It was one of my initiatives coming in as director to reach out to the community. We’re entering our 10th year and I thought, “Let’s take risks. Let’s open it up.” Area 919 [an exhibit of work by Triangle artists] was a wonderful thing for the Nasher to do for the arts community. At the opening, it was the greatest vibe. Artists always have good parties. I’d like to keep the Area 919 project going.

We are also commissioning a mural for downtown by [abstract painter] Odili Donald Odita, and that’s another reach out to the community during our 10th anniversary year. We’re going to have teenager docents from Durham School of the Arts who will be able to answer questions from the public as Odili and his assistants create the mural. And he will do a mural inside the museum as well. We’re going to have a block party October 10 when we unveil that downtown mural – we’ll have DJs, some of the artists we know, Odili will come … and then at the museum, we will have a community day on October 4, which will be very much like the one that we had when we opened in 2005.

Do you ever miss the curating side of it?

I’m not going to lie. I do miss it. One of my favorite things about curating is installing the works of art because you never know until you get them in the room together how it’s going to work. They are like little presences, each artwork, and some of them don’t like to be next to each other. They war.

I want to support my curators and let them have the fun. I got to have fun for lots of years, and now it’s their turn. I’m very glad I was a curator in this job for so long because I really am sympathetic to not only what curators need and want, but I think that the work of art should be at the core of everything we do. If it’s not, I don’t think you’ll have as successful a museum.

What has been the most fulfilling moment of your career so far?

I was able to do my once-in-a-lifetime exhibition, El Greco to Velázquez: Art during the Reign of Philip III, in 2008, which the Nasher did with the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It was an incredible show; we got amazing loans in Durham – we had art from the Prado and the Louvre and all over. It was a beautiful and very meaningful show – I got 150 letters from members of the community, thanking me for bringing this show.

After El Greco, I got a letter from the Spanish embassy and … I was knighted by the King of Spain. It’s an honorary knighthood given to foreigners who spread the knowledge of Spanish culture abroad. All my great heroes, all the big wigs in Spanish art, they’ve all been granted this honor, and I thought I would never get it. That was the moment – when the ambassador pinned the medallion on – that was it. The medal is supposed to be used for grand occasions, so I’ll wear it for our 10th anniversary. – Amanda MacLaren DM