“No one will ever think it’s a bad thing to have a master’s. You might as well go.”

With this gentle spoken nudge from her then-MSU employee mother, College of Arts & Letters alumna Elysia Borowy-Reeder’s path to professional success in arts administration and education was set in motion.

Taking her mother’s advice to heart after completing her undergraduate degree in Visual Arts from Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, Borowy-Reeder went on to earn not one but two master’s degrees in Art History and Art Education, both from MSU’s Department of Art, Art History, and Design.

“My mother was right,” she said. “When my husband and I moved to Chicago after I graduated from MSU, I knew no one. It was my two master’s degrees from MSU that helped get me in the door and develop connections.”

She now serves as Executive Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD).

“This is a dream job, and I know it,” Borowy-Reeder said.

Under her leadership, MOCAD has gone from 18,000-20,000 visitors each year to now more than 100,000 annual visitors.

“We’ve done a lot of education and outreach, and we’re doing much more with artist support and community engagement, too,” she said.

MOCAD also now engages visitors with programs that are more “techno brunch” than gallery walk.

“We change every three months, so we always have a new exhibition or two or three, and tons of music,” Borowy-Reeder said. “I want Detroiter and other visitors to know this is YOUR museum for seeing fresh, new, innovative art that’s topical and relevant.”

As for the artists, Borowy-Reeder notes that it’s important for MOCAD to present fresh new artists who don’t show at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Alumna Elysia Borowy-Reeder, Executive Director, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD).
“What I want to do in this lifetime is work with artists to present their projects. That is what MOCAD does,” Borowy-Reeder said. “We want to give artists a place to show, a place to be with their peers. We want to be a source of inspiration for artists. There’s a lot of amazing talent in Detroit, and we want to put that in the spotlight.”

Also under Borowy-Reeder’s leadership, MOCAD started offering programs for area youth.

“Our outreach to youth is much needed in the community,” she said. “There are a lot of creative kids making art in their basements and garages, and there are so few art programs anymore. We do theatre, writing, and music, too, so it’s not just visual art.”

One MOCAD youth program is the Teen Council, comprising 20 area teens who are paid to develop programming ‘for teens by teens.’

“The Teen Council has been very successful and, last year, all of the kids in the program went on to college,” Borowy-Reeder said. “Many are interested in fields such as industrial design, cartooning, animation, and photography.”

Prior to coming to MOCAD, Borowy-Reeder was the Executive Director of the fledgling Contemporary Art Museum (CAM) in Raleigh, N.C. She also worked for four years for the Milwaukee Art Museum (MAM) and was at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (MCA) for more than seven years.

In April 2013, 13 years after leaving Michigan, the East Lansing native decided to return to head up MOCAD.

“I saw it as an opportunity to come home,” she said. “And everyone I spoke with echoed the same refrain: Detroit offers pure potential.”