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CITY MAGAZINE ★

NOVEMBER 2017

New In Town

★ **PRESIDENT LAURA FREID** ON MECA'S NEXT MOVES
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48

MECA's NEXT CHAPTER

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Laura Freid, forging
connections is a priority.



THIS PAGE:

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—Laura Freid



MECA'S

NEXT CHAPTER

For new president Dr. Laura Freid, forging community connections is a priority.

by SUSAN AXELROD Photography by NICOLE WOLF





On the first day of fall classes at the Maine College of Art (MECA) in Portland, the hallways of the Porteous building on Congress Street are thrumming with energy. There's a fresh sense of promise and possibility at every school on the first day of a new academic year, but at MECA, it seems multiplied. The new college president, Dr. Laura Freid, has just returned from a trip to Peaks Island in Casco Bay with about a hundred new students. They are beginning work on bachelor of fine arts degrees in 11 majors, including textile and fashion design—the only program of its kind in the country—and digital media, in addition to more traditional art-school disciplines such as painting, printmaking, and sculpture.

Freid is MECA's eighteenth president and joins the college at an important time in its 135-year history. In the six years under her predecessor, Don Tuski, MECA experienced significant growth in enrollment, endowment, and physical plant, including the addition of a new residence hall, and the establishment of the Bob Crewe Program in Art and Music, made possible by a three-million-dollar grant from the Bob Crewe Foundation. "I'm standing on the shoulders of really thoughtful visionaries," says Freid. "We're at a transformational moment at MECA, and I'm thinking that we will have to plan carefully about what we want ourselves to look like in 10 years." That includes not only the MECA campus, but also the city around it, she says. Her challenge as president will include identifying the community partners that can work with the college as it continues to evolve and grow. Freid's background in journalism, the arts, and higher education gives her a skill set that seems tailor-made for her new role. In the announcement of her appointment in March, MECA Board of Trustees chair Debbie Reed cited Freid's "demonstrated track record of engaging multiple constituencies while serving in senior leadership roles at multiple institutions." These include Freid's most recent post as CEO and executive director of Silkroad, a cross-cultural arts organization founded by cellist Yo-Yo Ma, chief

MECA
MAINE COLLEGE OF ART



This page and opposite page: Ashley Wernher-Collins, '16, is the studio technician for MECA's Textile and Fashion Design program. Launched in 2013, the program is the only one of its kind in the United States.





This page: A student works to forge steel in MECA's foundry. **Opposite page:** Tools of the trade in the Metalsmithing and Jewelry Design program.

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—LAURA FREID

communications officer at Harvard, executive vice president for public affairs and university relations at Brown University, and publisher and editor of *Bostonia* magazine. "I like to make things happen," Freid says.

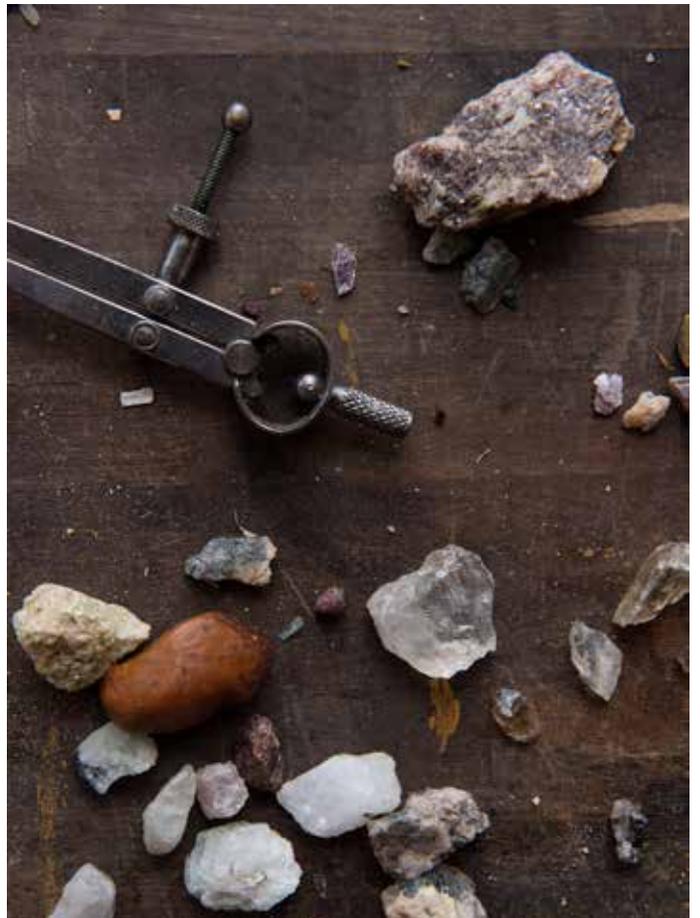
At Silkroad, Freid helped shape Ma's vision of using music to build connections across cultures. "I thought it would be a year or two, and then 12 years later we had recorded six CDs, produced a feature-length documentary film, *Music of Strangers*, toured 32 countries, and reached audiences of over 20 million people with our message of building cultural bridges," she says. Freid broadened the performance-

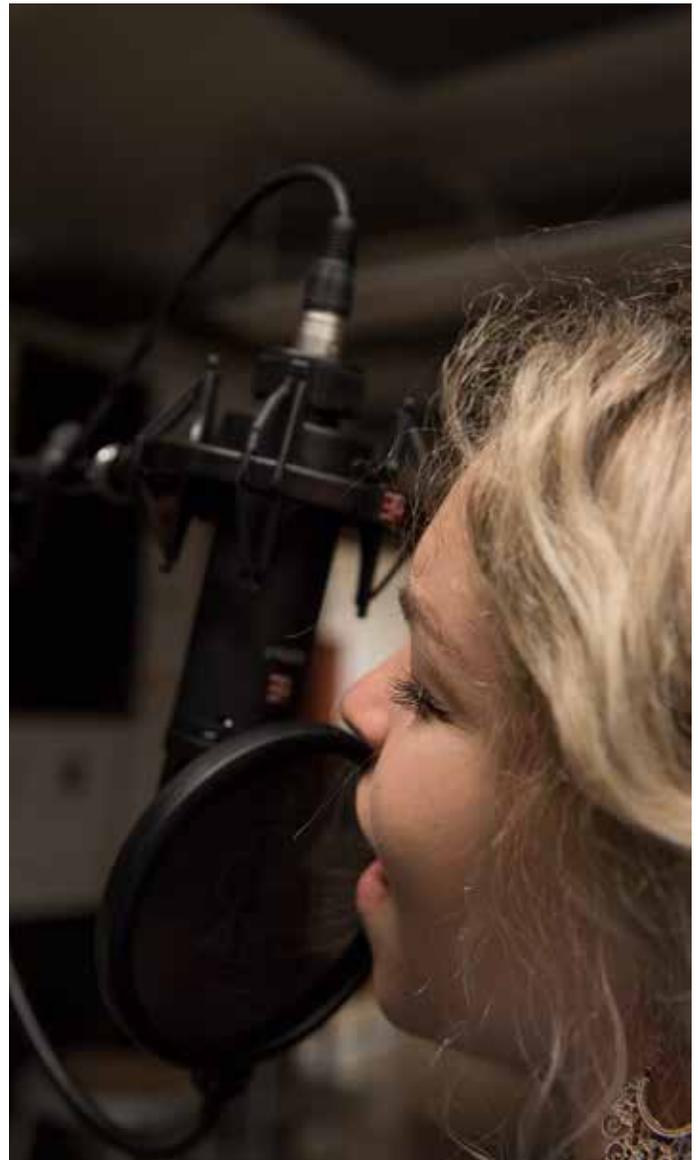
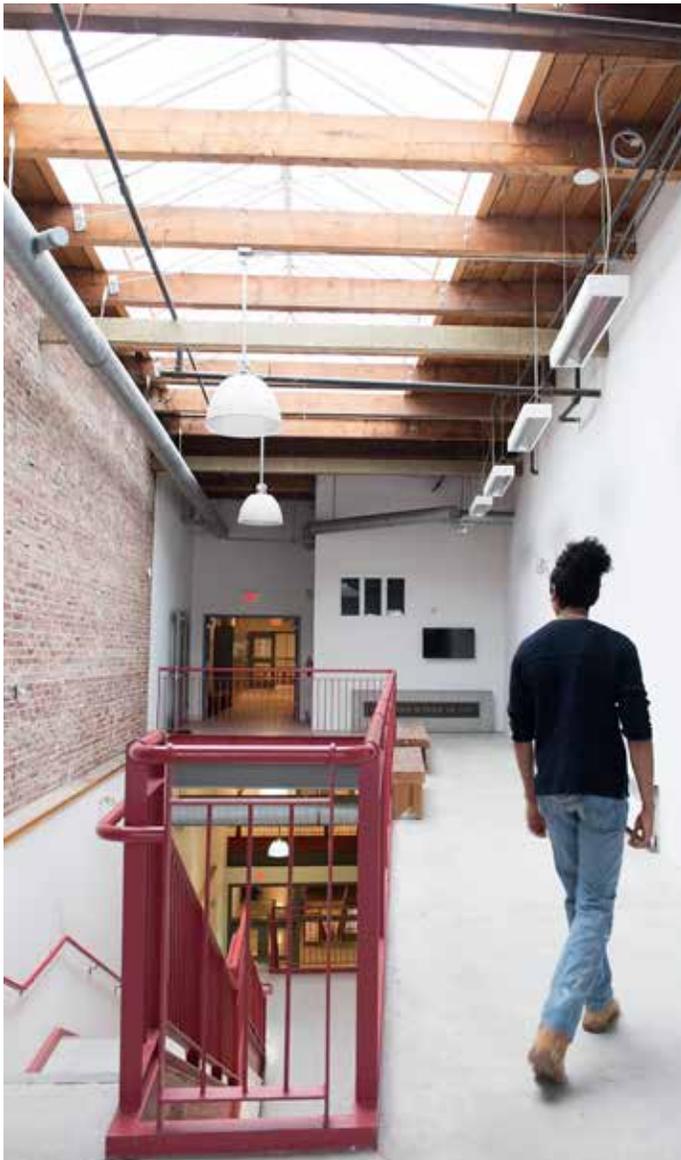
based organization to incorporate education, providing arts programming for middle schools, and forming partnerships with Rhode Island School of Design and Harvard, where Silkroad's presence continues.

Among other initiatives at Harvard, Freid was instrumental in establishing the Arts and Passion-Driven Learning Institute, an annual workshop for arts educators from around the world, cohosted by the university's Graduate School of Education. "So that's why it all connects," she says, of her career trajectory. "Here at MECA we are about passion-driven learning and the arts, and also about creative

entrepreneurship—helping passion-driven learners who are artists find a way to continue a life in the arts."

An important part of MECA's mission is to educate artists who can make a living, which involves learning how to package and present their art. "Artists are very connected to their art making, their emotions, and how they feel about the world, but they also need to help audiences understand what inspired their work," says Freid. She believes that the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies, which was integrated into MECA in 2016 and launched its inaugural graduate program at the college





From left: MECA provides support to artists by allowing students to display artwork throughout the year on any of the Porteous building's six floors. Students in the Bob Crewe Program in Art and Music have access to a state-of-the-art recording studio.

this fall, can play a role in that mission by training artists to create videos and podcasts. "I'm hoping for a lot of cross-fertilization here," she says. "It's another way of telling stories. People want to know the story behind the creativity, and I think all creators, all makers, have to learn these technical skills." Graduate students at Salt can earn a Certificate in Documentary Studies in one of two tracks: Radio and Podcasting, or Short Film and Photography.

Asked about connections between MECA and Portland, Freid points to the college's well-established continuing education program, which includes classes for children and adults, in addition to a challenging pre-college program for high-school students. Courses for adults are especially varied, ranging from metalsmithing and encaustic painting to digital photography

and Arabic calligraphy, the latter taught by artist, activist, and former prisoner of war Kifah Abdulla. "More than 1,500 people a year come through our incredibly rich continuing education program, which is amazing for our small arts college," says Freid.

MECA and the city are "joined at the hip," she says. "And I can only see that growing, because MECA is going to continue to be one of the nation's most vibrant learning centers in the arts." Freid adds, however, that there is work to be done in getting the crowds that flock to the Old Port to venture into the city's Arts District. "It's very attractive down by the water, but two blocks up is the future," she says. "The more that people can walk up the street and experience the next generation of artists, I think that would be great for Portland, but Congress Street needs to step up to the challenge and

the opportunity, and we're happy to be part of that."

Freid has settled into the East End with her husband, Dr. David Gottesman, a therapist, and their standard poodle, Alto. "I'm enjoying the intimacy of the community; it's just what I wanted," she says. "I feel like my personal mission statement and MECA's are very aligned." That said, a large part of her job so far has involved reaching out for information and to forge connections. "I've probably had 500 meetings since I got here," she says. "What can we do? How can we do it better? Who can we do it with? I was quoting designer Daniel Hudson Burnham for the faculty the other day: 'Make no little plans, for they have no magic.' I believe we need to be inclusive, make big plans, and invite everyone to jump on board." ★