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## MUSIC FORWARD FOUNDATION TURNS 30 ALL ACCESS FEST RETURNS TO WILTERN

By DEBORAH SPEER

NURIT SMITH has led Music Forward Foundation through plenty of challenges the last three years, COVID not the least of them. She's now preparing for the return of the All Access Festival, a job fair and recruitment event at The Wiltern in Los Angeles Sept. 26.  
*Courtesy Music Forward Foundation*

**M**usic Forward Foundation is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year but, after three years of the coronavirus pandemic and an industry emerging from it into a whole new world, in many ways it's like starting from scratch.

And where better to begin than at the beginning – by recruiting the next generation of young people to make the live entertainment industry its career? Music Forward Foundation (MFF) is starting by recruiting high schoolers and college-age young people and giving them the opportunity to get an in-person, behind-the-scenes look at what goes into making a show and meeting some of the industry movers and shakers to help make that dream come true.

MFF is staging its annual All Access Festival April 26 at The Wiltern in Los Angeles, where it expects to draw a diverse cohort of up to 1,000 young people to its in-person career fair – its first since October 2019. Students aged 16-24 from all backgrounds across L.A. County and well beyond can get their introductions to careers in the music industry.

All Access Fest offers keynote speakers, panels, hands-on learning, career resources, venue tours and exhibitors. This day-long event features networking, activities and access to leading industry experts and companies to inspire and prepare the next generation of artists, leaders and innovators.

When *Pollstar* last spoke with MFF Executive Director Nurit Smith, the foundation

was focused on helping to build Crew Nation, Live Nation's program to support the men and women behind the scenes hit hardest by layoffs and furloughs that began in March 2020 due to COVID.

Now, with restrictions lifted and concert touring back into full swing (and then some), MFF is finding a completely changed landscape in which to do its philanthropic work.

"There wasn't a plan to guide us through COVID and, as we're coming out of COVID, it seems as if we are feeling our way back," Smith says. "You can't say, 'This is how we did it in 2019.' It's a new world. It's even about how we're putting All Access back up. We can acknowledge what we did three years ago. But, at the same time, schools are different, venues are different. How we're entering the space and how we're, in a sense, going back, because live is all different now."

Smith acknowledges that the sea change in the live business isn't solely the result of the global COVID pandemic – though that has indeed changed the world as we knew it.

"Our raison d'être is diversity and inclusivity and making sure that the industry is accessible to everyone. But I think there was a big 'a-ha' moment for it with the racial reckoning that happened a couple of years ago in this country. There was also a moment of realization that we don't have enough bodies; we need to build this pipeline to get more people involved in this industry. There wasn't enough staff. Companies are having to turn down work because

they can't get enough employees."

Smith points to gaps in the staffing chain caused by the pandemic, particularly in hard-hit sectors such as transportation where crews and technicians found other careers when the concerts stopped. All Access Fest offers a unique opportunity for recruits to not only speak with industry professionals and take in panels, but get a hands-on experience in a concert venue as well, at The Wiltern.

"They're getting the feel of being at a venue and understanding that this is a career path," Smith explains. "We want to show them the plethora of options and challenge them to learn about them – to make links to their personal strengths. We want to make sure that there are spaces for engagement and stepping out of what feels like a passive space for young people to sit in and hear folks talk. We want to make sure that on all the panels, there's an artist perspective, too."

Smith emphasizes that, industrywide, the recruitment effort is a collaborative one and she's been talking with groups doing similar work. Meetings are in the works to align those efforts as well. And MFF intends to expand the All Access Fest well beyond Los Angeles as it celebrates its 30th year.

"Historically, All Access was bringing young people into venues, touring them, giving them that feel. But as we're coming back, we're making it more of an experience. And we'll have them in cities across the country now and doing more things in the future," Smith says. ★