

HOUSTON GIVES

H-E-B's Winell Herron wants to make art accessible for everyone

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Photo: Elizabeth Conley, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Winell Herron has never forgotten her first ballet. She thinks back to her 6-year-old self, seeing “The Nutcracker” with her mother in Austin, and how moments like that can really change the trajectory of a person’s life.

“It was transformative; I got involved in dance classes after that,” Herron says. “I still see that magic today — kids’ eyes get big, their mouths hang open. A lot of people take that feeling for granted.”

Now, as H-E-B’s group vice president of public affairs, diversity and environmental affairs, it’s part of her job to invest in inclusive art experiences for Texans from all communities. She believes that a thriving arts culture is the cornerstone of a prosperous city, especially Houston.

“Houston really leverages diversity as a strength,” she says. “Our company values align with those who need opportunities to experience the arts, a great education and the ability to put food on the table — regardless of what ZIP code they live in.”

Which is why in its stores H-E-B hangs work by local artists including Ansen Seale (“Blue by You” at H-E-B Bellaire), Elaine Bradford (“Who Says Chickens Can’t Fly” at H-E-B Heights) and Patrick Renner and Kelly O’Brien (“Oroblanco” at H-E-B Buffalo Heights, opening this fall). Or why H-E-B takes a particular interest in sponsoring events including the annual Thanksgiving Day Parade and special performances at Miller Outdoor Theatre in Hermann Park.

Because it’s accessible to everyone.

“Miller is open to the public, but what’s more, people can bring their own food,” Herron, 52, explains. “Eating out can be challenging for some folks, and our goal is to really look at the city and where we’re engaged.”

The Texas Cultural Trust shares the same objective. The Austin-based arts-advocacy organization uses data and research to bolster the argument that art is a universal language and brings communities together. Through programs and signature events including the Texas Medal of Arts biennial awards gala, Texas Women for the Arts, Arts and Digital Literacy, Young Masters and Art Can, the nonprofit has a singular mission: to be the leading voice for the arts in education, advocacy and economic impact in the Lone Star State.

Heidi Marquez Smith plans to make that vision a reality. So two years ago, when TCT named her executive director, she prioritized appointing diverse voices to the board of directors. And Herron was at the top of her list.

“I knew it was going to be a challenge. I know she’s very busy,” says Marquez Smith, who was introduced to Herron by H-E-B CEO and chairman Charles Butt. “From my first interaction with her, I knew exactly why Charles selected her to fill the role she’s in.”

Though you’d be hard-pressed to find a Houstonian who’s unfamiliar with H-E-B, even the supermarket chain’s most loyal shoppers might not immediately recognize Herron. Not like they would J.J. Watt, the brand’s contractual TV-commercial star and Texans’ defensive end. Or Scott McClelland, president of H-E-B Food/Drug Stores turned sleeper-hit personality after he appeared next to Watt on the small screen.

But to those who move within Houston’s philanthropic circles, Herron is essential. Where she goes, donations — both in-kind and the jumbo-check-presentation variety — follow.

“In my role, along with a team, we concentrate on outreach, work with the media, providing support to the community, disaster relief and work with key leaders as they relate to H-E-B brands,” says the towering brunette, who favors A-line silhouettes and a cherry-painted smile. “It’s not just about the financial contributions we make to nonprofit organizations in Houston and across the state, but I’m also a big believer in rolling up our sleeves and sweat equity.”

Herron’s got a lot on her plate, and that’s no grocery-store pun. More often than not, Herron, a Bayou City resident, is on the road, traveling across the state and northeast Mexico for site visits and events among some 400 locations.

She's held her current position for more than a decade, working her way up from store operations, service-team leader, director of workforce diversity, vice president of customer service and group president of diversity and people development.

It's that breadth of experience that was missing from the Texas Cultural Trust's board.

"We want people to be aware of the impact that the arts have on our economy, education, culture and the Texas way of life," Marquez Smith says. "Our biggest challenge is spreading awareness of our work and increasing access to the arts for all children. We want to get kids into museums and musicians into schools."

As in Herron's case, exposure to creative outlets shaped Marquez Smith's early development. A native Spanish speaker, she attended a Title I school, which provides instructional support beyond the regular classroom curriculum to help low-achieving students meet state standards in core academic subjects. "But I had access to ballet and tap. That gave me more confidence."

Through H-E-B, Herron earmarks performances that she thinks Houston students should attend free of cost, including "The Nutcracker."

It's one of the reasons the Houston Arts Alliance, which executes privately funded special projects to meet the needs of the arts community, such as disaster preparation and temporary public art projects, is honoring Herron and H-E-B during its upcoming "Immerse" fall benefit. They deliver — money and manpower — where needed.

"Having that free admission, taking a bus into downtown and experiencing the Wortham (Theater Center) for the first time. ... It's about breaking barriers," she says. "Kids need to walk into places that they've never been, see what's happening behind the scenes. You never know where that road may lead."

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