

Efficiency and Innovation



JAN WEEMS

Department of Natural and
Cultural Resources,
Museum of Natural Sciences

Jan Weems is the Head of Early Childhood and Elementary Education at the N.C. Museum of Natural Sciences, a program of the N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources. She leads Museum programs that connect children, their parents, and teachers with the natural world. Weems' career focused on enabling hands-on, sensory-rich natural science experiences for visitors.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused the Museum, including all regional network locations, to suspend public operations beginning in March 2020. Weems spearheaded the creation of the Museum's Virtual Learning Studio to meet the demands of its online presence. She enlisted the Museum's Digital Media and Facilities teams to transform a classroom space, originally designed for in-person programs for new online programs

Under her leadership, they successfully created a studio with engaging and exciting virtual learning programs that can be replicated at other sites as well. A green screen created opportunities to virtually transport participants to new landscapes, where they could observe a Monarch caterpillar transform from chrysalis to butterfly. They even held virtual dance parties in the Acro Dome. Weems also cared for live Venus fly traps and pitcher plants at home while the Museum was closed.

While the journey into the virtual realm was challenging, pivoting to virtual learning has allowed the Museum to widen its reach. Programs that formerly served predominantly Wake and surrounding counties now serve the entire state, and sometimes other states and countries. Between July 2020, when the studio went live, and February 2021, 136 programs were conducted in the studio, engaging nearly 4,000 North Carolina participants. While a team effort, Weems contributed significantly to the success of the Virtual Learning Studio, exceeding original projects and sustaining it long term.

