Helping Hands: A Balancing Act

What museum department isn’t overworked? The collections department of the National Building Museum (NBM) in Washington, DC, is no exception. This article is an account of how my department strives to achieve a balance between exhibition work and our responsibility to the permanent collection. With a collection of more than 150,000 physical objects, including photographs, architectural drawings, architectural fragments, and toys, it is easy to find any number of tasks to tackle in regard to collections management. One of the most beneficial resources we utilize to help us maintain the balance between exhibitions and collections work is our intern and volunteer program.

The NBM hosts more than 200 volunteers who assist various departments throughout the year, and with more than 20 interns every summer and additional interns throughout the fall and spring semesters, there are numerous opportunities to recruit these talented and willing people to help with collections-related tasks. Training, oversight, and appreciation are all key elements in any successful intern and volunteer program. All NBM interns and volunteers are first routed through our visitor services department. On their application, they are asked to indicate which departments most interest them. If someone indicates “collections” on their application, we first conduct an informal phone interview. If we think the person sounds responsible and interested, we bring them in for a face to face discussion about the various projects available. Once everyone is satisfied that the match is right, we set up a work schedule. Establishing and communicating expectations on all fronts, especially regarding individual projects, is extremely important. When volunteers start work, they are given a volunteer handbook that sets out the Museum’s expectations and what they can expect from their experience here. The first few days are set aside for orientation to the Museum and specific training within their particular department. Because working with collection materials requires specialized security and handling skills, we developed a specific set of procedures that help us train our interns and volunteers to work with physical objects. Over the course of their project, we continue to oversee their work and provide valuable feedback, both positive and constructive, that helps us ensure everyone feels valued and helps us maintain a certain standard of care for the collections. Our department works with two to six interns and volunteers at any given time, which while allowing us to accomplish more, also stresses our work load. Once we see a true commitment from them, we encourage senior volunteers—those who have appropriate experience—to train and supervise other volunteers and interns. This additional responsibility offers them a chance to take even more ownership of their projects and allows us to focus on other essential work.

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Mary Purcell is a collections department volunteer with the National Building Museum.
From the President

This newsletter focuses on staff and volunteer relations—something very important to AAMV. We are a national organization that represents museum volunteers and the staff members who work with them. Today, in our museums, there is a purposeful and ongoing effort to break down barriers and increase the teamwork between paid and volunteer staff. The contributions of staff and volunteers working together that you will read about in this newsletter speaks volumes on what staff and volunteers can accomplish together.

As described in our new book, Transforming Museum Volunteering: A Practical Guide for Engaging 21st Century Volunteers*: “Successful volunteer programs are driven by a spirit of partnership and the understanding that everyone – volunteer and paid staff alike – makes a beneficial contribution to the museum. Volunteers and staff operate in mutually supportive, overlapping spheres. In the ideal situation, they have complementary roles, and each group values the contributions of the other.” When we put first what benefits the museum, everything else seems to fall into place. Mutual respect and being part of a team that wants only the best for our museums is often the key to success.

Perhaps the biggest news we have to share with our loyal members is that soon we will be updating our AAMV website (www.aamv.org). We are going to bring our already helpful website to a new level. We will have a “members only” section which will have copies of current and past AAMV newsletters. We are also collecting information from our members which they would like to share and that we will publish on our website for the convenience of our members. That being said, is your museum increasing volunteer and staff teamwork? We would like to hear about it. Helping each other is a very important part of the AAMV vision. Please contact us with new ways we can help you and please keep checking our website for updated and current information.

Warmly,

Gin Wachter, 636-458-4257, email@ginwachter.com

* AAMV's book can be purchased on our website: www.aamv.org (a rebate is available for AAMV members).

From the Editor

Great volunteer programs thrive on good communication among staff, departments, management, and volunteers. In this newsletter, a museum staff member in a collections department shares the essence and success of their volunteer program. The article stands as a testament to the value of staff and volunteer communication as well as effective coordination between departments and staff.

Volunteer programs are continuing to take on new shapes and forms. How museums will mold their volunteer programs is only limited by their imagination. Mary Purcell, the featured volunteer from the National Building Museum, is a reminder that skilled volunteers are eager to work within our museum walls.

If you have an inspiring challenge to share or feedback, please email me at anitacater@verizon.net.

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This newsletter is a quarterly publication of the American Association for Museum Volunteers, the nonprofit membership and service organization dedicated to the millions of volunteers in all categories of museums in the United States and to the professionalism in museum volunteer program management. AAMV welcomes submissions of manuscripts for publication. Queries should be made to the Editor. Information about AAMV’s other services is available at www.AAMV.org.
A Volunteer’s Perspective

Recently, the National Building Museum (NBM) in Washington, DC, acquired a collection of more than 2,000 architectural toys, which needed to be unpacked, processed, and catalogued. To help with this task, they recruited two volunteers to help. One of these volunteers, Mary Purcell, worked with them to develop new processing and cataloging procedures. Cecelia Walls, Registrar at the Museum, recently sat down with Mary to discuss her role at the Museum and her thoughts on volunteerism in general.

Cecelia Walls: What do you enjoy most about volunteering?

Mary Purcell: I like trying new things and exploring abilities I haven’t been able to explore in employment. It’s an outlet for me.

CW: Was there something that drew you to museums in particular?

MP: It started in high school. I wanted to be an artist and I started going to the National Gallery every couple of weeks, looking at exhibits and the way that paintings were displayed. It was something I always loved. I think it’s [also] because my dad took me to museums [as a child] so I have all these good mental associations with museums.

CW: And when you chose the NBM, what was it that attracted you to collections?

MP: I’d done some collections [work] as a volunteer at the Bead Museum, and I prefer collections work to other museum work. It’s more up my alley because I get to combine the things I’m interested in: writing, art, design, and organization.

CW: How did you go about developing the cataloging process for the toy collection?

MP: Dana [a staff member] started me off with some good guidelines and trained me. I took what she told me and pushed it further in terms of applying it directly to the toys.

CW: And do you think having been there from the beginning helped?

MP: Yes, definitely! Seeing this huge spectrum of the collection, actually seeing it up close and handling it like that, had a big impact.

CW: And how closely do you work with [the collection] staff? Do you feel it’s a good relationship?

MP: Oh, yes. I love everybody. I really do. I like coming here a lot, I feel really comfortable with everyone. It’s not like that everywhere.

CW: Do you take advantage of other volunteer opportunities available, like enrichment tours?

MP: I hadn’t been able to, but now I’m intending to take more advantage because there’s a lot going on.

CW: How would you compare your volunteer experience at the NBM with others you’ve experienced?

MP: My volunteer experience at NBM has been best suited to my interests, compared with other places, particularly because I’ve had opportunities to develop some new skills as my role as a volunteer has evolved. I feel that the work I’m doing now is really vital to the institution in its own way. It’s that kind of progressive volunteer development that really stands out among my experiences.

CW: What do you like best about being a volunteer at the NBM?

MP: The thing I like best about being a volunteer at the NBM is that I feel very welcome and appreciated here. Volunteer work seems to be highly valued at the NBM, and that’s directly reflected in the way that volunteers are consistently recognized and rewarded. It’s definitely a positive work environment, and that’s important to me.

CW: Is there anything else you would like to add?

MP: I was having a discussion the other day with a classmate about volunteer work. We were talking about the value of it both to the individual and to the institution, that there’s this mutually beneficial relationship. I was thinking how there’s not enough of that in our society.

Helping Hands continued from cover

Another important part of ensuring a beneficial intern and volunteer program is appreciation. We thank our interns and volunteers whenever possible and provide them with opportunities to enrich their experience with us by involving them in staff-related meetings, and providing enrichment tours and appreciation events.

The intern and volunteer program provides an affordable way to complete numerous collections-related tasks that would otherwise have taken twice as long to complete. The benefits to interns and volunteers are numerous. Not only do they acquire a sense of accomplishment because they have the opportunity to see the task through from beginning to end, but they also receive a concrete experience by working directly with collection objects.

Cecelia A. Walls is Registrar at the National Building Museum in Washington, DC.
Productive Volunteer/Staff Partnerships

Productive volunteer/staff partnerships are characterized by:
1. Two-way communication to inform both staff and volunteers about “who’s doing what, when, and how;”
2. Team building that involves volunteers in all levels of the museum’s planning and decision making to increase the ownership of its goals by everyone;
3. A clear understanding by volunteers of all institutional roles including their own;
4. Open and honest evaluation of volunteer activities by both staff and volunteers; and
5. Public and private recognition of the accomplishments of volunteers and their staff partners.

The best approach to guidelines for staff and volunteers is one of “expectations” for both. Here are a few examples so that you get the idea. Expectations are sometimes more easily accepted than “rules” or “guidelines.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volunteers can expect:</th>
<th>Staff members can expect:</th>
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<tr>
<td>to be trained for the tasks they will do</td>
<td>for volunteers to show up on time for assignments</td>
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<tr>
<td>to understand how their work fits into the museum</td>
<td>for volunteers to be respectful of the demands on staff time</td>
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<tr>
<td>to be thanked for their efforts</td>
<td>to be thanked for their efforts</td>
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<tr>
<td>for their staff partners to be courteous, kind, and thoughtful</td>
<td>for their volunteer partners to be courteous, kind, and thoughtful</td>
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If you’re looking for specific examples of guidelines for staff working with volunteers, here are a few to consider:
• The types of things that volunteers do (and don’t do)
• Who volunteers are and what their backgrounds are
• What volunteers contribute to the organization
• The role of staff members in designing volunteer jobs, recruiting, screening, and supervising
• What to do when problems arise (volunteers who don’t dress appropriately, eat on the job, don’t behave appropriately, etc.)
• Who supervises whom and about what (lines of communication, supervision, etc.)
• What not to do with volunteers (personal errands, meaningless/repetitious tasks, get angry, yell, etc.)
• How to recognize and reward volunteers (give specific examples)
• Explain what’s in it for the staff if the volunteer program works
• How to evaluate volunteer performance (create an evaluation form for staff to use)
• Erase any stereotypical images of volunteers (little old ladies with blue hair)

Connie Pirtle is the Founder/Director of Strategic Nonprofit Resources, a Washington, DC, firm devoted to strengthening volunteer engagement. She is also AAMV’s Publications Director and can be reached at AskConnieP@cs.com.

2008 Calendar

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<th>National Volunteer Week</th>
<th>April 27 - May 3</th>
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<tr>
<td>Western Museums Association Annual Conference,</td>
<td>Anchorage, Alaska</td>
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<td>Anchorage, Alaska</td>
<td>September 17-21</td>
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<td>Southeastern Museums Conference Annual Conference,</td>
<td>Birmingham, AL</td>
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<td>Birmingham, AL</td>
<td>October 14-18</td>
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<td>Mountain Plains Museums Association Annual Conference,</td>
<td>Kansas City, Kansas</td>
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<td>Kansas City, Kansas</td>
<td>October 20-24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Association of Midwest Museums Annual Conference,</td>
<td>Kansas City, MO</td>
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<td>Kansas City, MO</td>
<td>October 21-24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums Annual Conference,</td>
<td>Washington, DC</td>
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<td>Washington, DC</td>
<td>October 26-29</td>
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<tr>
<td>New England Museum Association Annual Conference,</td>
<td>Warwick, Rhode Island</td>
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<td>Warwick, Rhode Island</td>
<td>November 12-14</td>
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AAMV at the 2208 AAM meeting

AAMV is sponsoring two exciting and informative sessions at the American Association of Museum’s 2008 annual meeting in Denver, Colorado.

Sunday, April 27, 2:15-3:30 pm
Leading the Corps: New Approaches to Docent/Volunteer/Intern Programs

Tuesday, April 29, 9:00-10:15 am
Talking Shop: Roundtable Discussion with Volunteer Managers and Docents

Monday April 28, 12:30-2:00 pm
AAMV Annual Meeting and Luncheon

Rika Burnham, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Elliott Kai-Kee.

J. Paul Getty Museum, will be guest speakers on “Art, Wonder, and the Museum Visitor Experience.” Tickets may be purchased through AAM or AAMV. For more information contact AAMV President, Gin Wachter at email@ginwachter.com.
What is AAMV?

The American Association for Museum Volunteers (AAMV) is the only national association representing more than 1,000,000 volunteers in all categories of museums. AAMV is affiliated nationally with the American Association of Museums (AAM), the U.S. Federation of Friends of Museums (USFFM), and internationally with the World Federation of Friends of Museums (WFFM).

AAMV...
• Promotes professional standards of volunteerism.
• Provides a forum for the exchange of ideas and information.
• Is a not-for-profit organization.

• Accomplishes these goals in cooperation with museum directors, staff and boards of trustees.
• Offers opportunities for continuing education through panel discussions and workshops at local, regional and national conferences.
• Encourages volunteers and volunteer program managers to become familiar with projects and programs both locally and nationally.
• Informs and represents volunteers in advocacy for tax benefits and other legislation at local and national levels.
• The only organization dedicated to museum volunteerism for more than 25 years!

Become an AAMV Member Today!

AAMV members include individuals, groups and institutions who are interested in promoting volunteerism in museums and in starting or improving museum volunteer programs. Most AAMV members are museum volunteers, volunteer groups and museum staff members who work with volunteers.

Membership benefits...
• Participation in AAMV listserv.
• Quarterly AAMV newsletter.
• Discount on AAMV publications.
• Information on creating and sustaining a museum volunteer program.
• Access to state and regional representatives as well as a network of volunteer professionals and experienced volunteers.

• Opportunity to take part in workshops and panel discussions at regional, state, national and international meetings.
• Notification of programs on museum volunteer issues at regional, national and international conferences.
• Advocacy for benefits for museum volunteers and programs.

Join AAMV today!

Check out the AAMV website at www.aamv.org. You’ll find:
• Information on the benefits and services of AAMV
• Excerpt from AAMV’s new book, Transforming Museum Volunteering
• Dates to note
• Links to other important resources on volunteer program management
• The AAMV Board of Directors and Regional Directors
• Membership information
• How to join AAMV Listserv

If you have any questions about your membership please visit our website www.aamv.org.

*This category will receive 10 newsletters mailed to a single address.

Send membership applications to: AAMV, P. O. Box 9494, Washington, DC 20016
AAMV Board