Meet Newly Appointed New England Regional Director, Leah Burgins

This summer has been one of transitions for me—in addition to joining the AAMV board as a New England Regional Director, I graduated from Brown University with a master’s in Public Humanities and started working at Brown’s on-campus Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology as the Manager of Museum Education and Programs. This new role has come with many exciting challenges, including assessing and further developing the museum’s volunteer student docent program, and I’m excited to have the support of the AAMV community as I re-enter the museum sector as a young professional.

My interest in volunteer management began last year, when the Haffenreffer approached me about piloting a student docent program for the institution. After a five-month research and development stage, during which I consulted volunteer managers at a dozen different university museums, potentially interested Brown students, and the Haffenreffer’s Curator for Programs and Education, the Museum’s Union of Student Educators (MUSE) launched in September 2016. We recruited students through Brown’s “Morning Mail” system—an automated daily email newsletter—that invited interested students to apply through a brief Google Form. We had hoped to recruit 10-15 students for the pilot program, and we hit this goal. About 15 students applied and were accepted to MUSE, with eleven committing for the Fall 2016 semester.

MUSE’s first cohort met regularly for training meetings, planned and implemented programming, and participated in professional development opportunities. The training meetings addressed everything from visitor services best practices to ongoing theoretical debates in museum anthropology.

Among the most popular was a two-part “Your Body as Pedagogy” session that encouraged students to explore their body and its movement through space as pedagogical tools. I facilitated one session on public speaking, a Dance Exchange mover extraordinaire, Tyler French, facilitated exercises in the second session that centered movement as a way to experience the museum. In their reflections on these training sessions, MUSE members commented that thinking about their bodies as pedagogical tools helped them feel more confident when interacting with visitors.

MUSE members used this and other training to develop programming. In addition to planning a “MUSE Appreciation Showcase & Reception” for their peers in December 2016 and a public “World Anthropology Day” event in February 2017, MUSE members developed and delivered field trips throughout the year for participants in the museum’s “Think Like an Archaeologist” outreach program to sixth graders in Providence Public Schools. Inspired by a current exhibition about arctic anthropology and the museum’s arctic teaching collection, MUSE members created a hands-on, inquiry-based program that addressed clothing, hunting, and communication in the arctic. MUSE members developed and practiced these programs during training sessions and, while I was on hand to answer questions or provide guidance, I was impressed by the enthusiasm MUSE members brought to addressing programmatic content and logistics.
Additionally, I arranged several professional development opportunities for MUSE members. We assisted Geralyn Ducady, Director of the Newell D. Goff Center for Education and Public Programs at the Rhode Island Historical Society, in brainstorming hands-on elements for tours of their John Brown House Museum. Jackie Delamatre, Curator of Education at the Lippitt House Museum, discussed the pros and cons of using Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) for teaching with ethnographic objects. And we teamed up with the Guild, the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) Museum’s student group, to explore objects from both the anthropological and artistic perspectives. MUSE members reported these opportunities as highlights of the program, and the Haffenreffer was pleased for the opportunity to strengthen their partnerships with these institutions through the MUSE program.

Overall, the Haffenreffer has considered the MUSE program a success. Comprised of undergraduate and graduate students from Anthropology, Archaeology, History, Applied Math, and other departments, MUSE members have brought diverse, interdisciplinary perspectives to the museum’s interpretation of archaeological and ethnographic objects. MUSE members have also appreciated the program. Prior to their involvement with MUSE, some members had no museum experience and/or little familiarity with anthropology as a discipline. An on-going evaluation of the program revealed that, as a group, MUSE increased their knowledge of and skills in museum education and museum anthropology. The evaluation also demonstrated that MUSE met many of the institution’s goals and the members’ expectations for the program.

I learned a lot from piloting and evaluating MUSE, and was thrilled to have the opportunity to share what I learned at AAM’s 2017 Annual Meeting as a participant in the Emerging Innovators Forum. My poster, “How to Launch a Student Docent Program,” outlined the process described above in more detail, and linked to a public Google Folder with more information about the program, including evaluation reports, training syllabi, and a copy of the AAM poster. I encourage anyone interested in learning more about MUSE or my experience launching a volunteer student docent program to check out the Google Folder (tinyurl.com/hma-muse). If your institution is contemplating launching a student docent program, some of my major takeaways from the program can be summarized in the next column.

1. Clearly define roles and responsibilities, from the beginning. Even though MUSE was an experimental pilot program, members needed to know they were productively contributing to the museum’s mission. And as busy students, MUSE members needed flexible and clearly communicated expectations for the program. By all accounts, acknowledging and honoring these needs were important elements that contributed to the program’s success.

2. Create a supportive environment that encourages risk taking. I found that MUSE members excelled under creative constraints. Providing constructive feedback and the space for students to learn through practice resulted in interdisciplinary programming that MUSE members were invested in.

3. Be prepared to invest in the program, and be ready to pivot. Overall, the museum committed about $3,000 to the MUSE program, with the majority of these funds directed to my salary. Throughout the year, I dedicated roughly 180 hours to the program (about 5-10 hours per week). In considering MUSE’s future, I’ve been critically assessing if this time and financial investment is sustainable or sufficient. In my new role with the museum, I’m attempting to prioritize paid student labor as opposed to volunteer docents, which leaves many questions unanswered for the future of the MUSE program. In pivoting the program for the upcoming school year, I’m taking cues from the most important stakeholders—MUSE members—and may have more to share soon about this reimagining of the program.

Though I’m relatively new to volunteer management, I’m excited to bring my experience with the MUSE program and my generally green perspective to AAMV. I look forward to connecting with colleagues in New England and beyond, and encourage folks to get in touch! I’d love to start a conversation.

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Enriching Exhibitions Through Volunteer Gallery Attendants

By: Lindsey Hammel

Third Space is the Birmingham Museum of Art’s (BMA) first large exhibition of contemporary art and like most contemporary exhibitions, it contains works of art that are not always easy to understand. The idea of having volunteers as gallery attendants for the exhibition was born out of the desire to help visitors feel empowered to interpret the artworks themselves and understand the connections made in the exhibition. The primary job of the gallery attendant would be to help visitors use the BMA’s smartguide, a web-based digital guide that serves as a quick guide to the works of art. We also felt it was important for gallery attendants to be available to answer questions and engage in conversations around artworks with visitors in order enhance their experience.

A gallery attendant is stationed at a desk outside of the exhibition to be welcoming and make the process of connecting to the smartguide as easy as possible. They offer iPad minis for check out or help visitors access it on their own device. The smartguide was revamped for the opening of Third Space, it has quick facts about artworks and the artists, as well as audio clips from members of the Birmingham community reacting to artworks. It was important that visitors feel that their reactions and interpretations were valid, just like those of the community members.

Gallery attendants also help us collect visitor feedback on the exhibition by asking them to complete a survey on an iPad as they exit. On busier days, we have an additional gallery attendant stationed inside the exhibition so they can be more easily available to visitors. The shifts are three and a half hours so they take turns sitting at the desk and floating in the gallery.

Gallery attendants needed to be ready before the opening party for Third Space, so the first training was held a week before the exhibition opened to the public. It was exciting for volunteers to get a sneak peak of the exhibition on a tour with Wassan Al-Khudhairi, former BMA Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art. She gave them information on the majority of the artworks so they could have talking points for each. We also provided the same study materials that we gave to the docents to prepare for tours and the smartguide was a resource as well. We prepared them for the possibility of strong reactions from visitors because many of the artworks were meant to evoke emotions. We gave some tips on how to engage in conversations with visitors about art and allow for visitors to have the opportunity to react to the artworks. As many of the volunteers were students interested in learning about museum careers, Wassan took some time to talk about the job of a curator and how the exhibition came together. Angela May, BMA Docent & Tour Coordinator and the content creator for the smartguide, gave the volunteers an overview of the smartguide and asked them to practice using it in the gallery which also helped her to useserved as a test run for the app.

We asked volunteers to commit to two shifts a month for at least six months or twelve shifts within a six month period. It was an expectation but not necessarily a requirement. However, we incentivized it with a free six month museum membership which would be renewed every time they committed to another twelve shifts throughout the run of the exhibition. In addition, they received prizes with any additional shifts within six months such as free tickets to our summer concert series, Art on the Rocks, gift certificates to the BMA Store, and BMA swag! Due to turnover, we will hold trainings for new volunteer groups every four to six months and plan to do refresher trainings for active volunteers when the some of the works on paper in the exhibition are replaced with new works.
The incentives have helped volunteers commit to shifts early on but they stay because of their love of art, the museum, and it’s visitors. We also have mixers every few months so volunteers can get to know each other and make friends with similar interests. We targeted our search for Third Space gallery attendants at local university art and history programs by contacting professors and distributing flyers. However, volunteers range from retirees to college students and include high school students in our Teen BMA program. This is the most diverse group we have had for an exhibition in terms of race and age. I believe the biggest draw of Third Space is that it’s a Contemporary show where more people see themselves reflected in the more diverse artists and subjects represented.

Third Space Volunteers at The Birmingham Museum of Art

Lindsey Hammel
Manager of Volunteer and Visitor Services
The Birmingham Museum of Art

Launching a Teen Volunteer Program

By: Abbey Earich

The Smithsonian Office of Visitor Services (OVS) and the Smithsonian Archives, with generous funding from the Smithsonian Women’s Committee, recently collaborated to create a new program that would link teens to the Castle, the Smithsonian’s first and oldest building located in Washington, D.C. The program had two primary goals: to energize the visitor experience for youth at the Castle and to provide a volunteer opportunity to local teens.

The Visitor Experience

This summer, OVS and the Smithsonian Archives launched a live-play mystery game, based on The Megatherium Club, an actual group of young naturalists who lived in the Smithsonian Castle during the mid-1800s. Geared toward teen visitors, “The Mystery of the Megatherium Club: Mustaches & Mayhem” allows groups a chance to solve puzzles and hidden clues while exploring the Castle and learning more about the Smithsonian’s history. The idea for the game developed through a series of human-centered design workshops with teens in the local Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. The teen workshops ensured that the visitor experience would be authentically interesting to a young audience. Learn more about these workshops through Connecting Teens and the Castle, a Smithsonian Archives Bigger Picture Blog post.

Developing the Volunteer Experience

A key element to the program was the inclusion of a live Game Master, a teen volunteer guide who would facilitate the experience for visitors. Prior to launching the game, OVS needed to create and implement a sustainable teen volunteer program, something that did not yet exist.

Smithsonian Castle and Blossoms
Research and Planning

OVS began by researching the legal and organizational guidelines and best practices for engaging minors as volunteers. Fortunately, the Smithsonian has existing policies outlining how to work with minors as well as an online training course for the Protection of Minors; both of which provided key guidelines for communicating and working with youth. In search of best practices in the field, OVS also looked internally and met with other Smithsonian staff who engage teens as volunteers. Colleagues offered great advice, lessons learned, and resources through their own experiences working with this unique audience.

Recruitment

As the visitor experience was beginning to take shape, OVS identified the volunteer program objectives, requirements, and needs which helped form the formal position description for the Smithsonian Castle Teen Volunteer Program. OVS then created an outreach and promotion plan which focused both internally within the Smithsonian and externally within the local community. OVS received a huge response from internal outreach; many colleagues forwarded the opportunity onto friends, family, and schools. OVS also posted the opportunity to online sites including the Smithsonian’s main website, [VolunteerMatch](http://www.volunteermatch.org) and [Teen Life](http://www.smithsonianmag.com). Within one month, OVS had received over 70 applications from enthusiastic teens.

Application Screening

From conversations with colleagues, OVS determined that a unique application form and process was necessary. The unique application consisted of three parts: basic applicant information, open ended and scenario-based essay questions, and two reference surveys. OVS staff screened applications by looking at various elements in their applications including previous volunteer experience as well as their expressed interest in the program. In the end, OVS invited 24 applicants to the next step in the process, the in-person interview.

In-person Interview

OVS created an informative and interactive group interview format. The interview structure included a group icebreaker, a round robin interview session with staff, scenario-based role-playing, and a “Tour of Me” presentation by the applicants. The “Tour of Me” was a pre-assignment for the applicants — to prepare a one-minute presentation for the group that was all about them. These presentations allowed the teens to shine; one applicant even shared his introduction to the tune of the theme song from Fresh Prince of Bel-air.

The dynamic interview format allowed OVS staff to not only talk with and hear from each of the teens, but also to observe the teens in a team environment, solving problems and scenarios related to the position. After the interview day, staff recommended 19 applicants to move forward in the program.

Lessons Learned

After recruiting and training 19 enthusiastic teen volunteers, OVS and the Smithsonian Archives launched “The Mystery of the Megatherium Club: Mustaches & Mayhem” to Castle visitors in July 2017. Although a much deeper debrief will occur after the program closes out its pilot summer, the team has learned valuable lessons related to recruiting and incorporating a teen volunteer program at the Castle.

1. Collaboration is key: It was imperative for OVS to work with our internal resources. This not only saved time, but also ensured that OVS followed legal guidelines and best practices.

2. Teens are different from adults: Obviously! Although this is common knowledge, it was a constant theme throughout this process; all procedures, communication styles, and management techniques were unique to the teen program.

3. Start small, learn, change, and then grow: OVS was very ambitious with the timeline and size of this program. However, the pilot is scheduled for a short, two-month timespan, allowing OVS to observe behaviors, consider what worked and what did not, and then to create a stronger and more sustainable program for the future.

In the end, OVS has succeeded in creating a more engaging experience for teens as both visitors and volunteers at the Smithsonian Castle. The team looks forward to continuing to expand these youth opportunities at the Smithsonian in the very near future.

As mentioned several times, collaboration with colleagues was imperative to the program’s success. If you would like a thought partner or more information on how to incorporate teens into your volunteer program, contact Abbey Earich, Smithsonian Office of Visitor Services and AAMV Mid-Atlantic Regional Manager, at EarichA@si.edu.

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Teen volunteer team, ready for the first tour! July 8, 2017, by Kristi Delich, Smithsonian.
Review: Museums and Internships AAM Webinar

By: Barbara Jaspersen

AAM’s recent webinar on internships offered informative and challenging insight into best practices for high-quality internships, as well as into larger issues and ethical problems that their administration can raise. Seen as crucial pathways to professional careers, internships are certainly woven into the fabric of many schools’ curricula and cultural organizations, and are more popular than ever. One participant directing a small museum concisely explained her commitment to internships: to giving back, to the value that interns bring to the field, and to the development of interns’ careers as a way of cultivating the next generation of museum professionals. All participants’ work interfaces with internships, and they shared their perspectives and offered advice to museums whose goal is to offer robust, manageable intern programs.

Currently, according to the Federal Department of Labor (Fact sheet #71) there are six criteria that define an internship as experiential learning and distinguish it from employment. These criteria apply only to for-profit organizations, but will likely be evaluated in the future with reference to non-profit organizations. In any case, the criteria are useful now for any organization that wishes to ensure its internships function in the true spirit for which they are intended. Their main points are that internships exist primarily for the educational benefit of the intern, that internships do not replace staff positions, and that interns are not employees. Webinar presenters pointed out that ambiguity can arise in distinguishing interns from both employees and volunteers, and that they are neither. It was advised that organizations give thought to how they will explicitly distinguish the categories, and that internship agreements be put in writing to insure clear understanding among all stakeholders. The Smithsonian offers a good model for how to craft descriptions of internships: they are not written as “position descriptions,” as job opportunities would be; instead, they describe clear learning objectives and projects.

Perhaps of even more use than the government’s criteria were those set forth by Omar Eaton-Martinez of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. To my mind, his program’s infrastructure and goals are a blueprint for high-quality, effective, and mutually beneficial internships: internship (projects) should be fruitful and productive; the museum provides orientation and structure; mutual understanding of stakeholders’ goals and expectations is established; interns inject themselves into the culture of the museum; mentoring is a core component of the internship; and finally, the intern, ideally, leaves with a professional vision for him/herself.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) offers its own outline of this form of experiential learning: “(Internships) integrate knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting. They give students the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience and make connections in professional fields they are considering for career paths; and give employers the opportunity to guide and evaluate talent.” This view has much in common with the Smithsonian’s.

Though the presenters did not distinguish between graduate and undergraduate interns, I have found that because they are often at quite different levels of intellectual development and capability, their internship experiences should be designed accordingly. Whatever the level of the intern, projects should be real-world and useful to the organization.

It is acknowledged that both the Federal guidelines and the Smithsonian’s high standards can present challenges for small and medium-sized museums. Staff resources may be limited, making it hard to accomplish such goals. Funds to pay interns who cannot afford to work for free may be limited or non-existent. Though non-profit organizations are currently not required to pay interns, it was generally advised that a reasonable stipend be offered towards offsetting of costs associated with an internship (covering uniforms, meals, housing in expensive cities, transportation, e.g.).
A stipend offers both practical support as well as respect for the intern’s contribution in a culture sometimes perceived as expecting its community to work for “love” rather than for fair remuneration. There was some discussion of how money might be raised in innovative ways, both to fund interns and to pay museums for the extra resources that might be needed to support an intern properly. The best-practice need for financial support on both sides, if not addressed, can lead to ethical quandaries, not the least of which is limiting internships to the affluent, thereby excluding those who must spend their time working for compensation, and thus hindering diversity efforts. Tying an internship to school credit and school curriculum may ease some of this quandary, and was recommended, in any case.

I’ve summarized in a very general way the takeaways for me of this fascinating panel discussion. Many questions were raised that I lack space to discuss here. But the greatest concern focused on equity (the expense of internships and how that impacts both smaller museums and non-affluent interns trying to enter the field) and the crafting of worthwhile internship programs. Panelists were optimistic about future institutionalizing of internships and new streams of financial support (with creative efforts by schools and museums and even municipalities themselves as a recent New York Times article notes). They also urged museums to give careful thought to their internship programs, perhaps offering them only when they feel able to do so with mindfulness and full focused support of the intern as a valuable and uniquely niched member of the museum community. My own view of this suggestion is that it is a good one, but in the absence of ideal conditions, museums should still move forward with internships to the best of their ability if they are eager to share the internship experience with a particularly appropriate candidate. Though structure and planning is certainly best-practice, for smaller institutions especially, a flexible, improvised experience can be serendipitous.

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AAM Webinar: Museums and Internships
Wednesday, October 26, 2016
2:00-3:30 PM (Eastern)

In collaboration with the Leadership and Management Network (LMN), and the Diversity Committee (DivCom), Professional Networks of the American Alliance of Museums.

Presenters
Karen Daly, executive director, Dumbarton House, Washington, DC
Omar Eaton-Martinez, intern and fellows program manager, Smithsonian National Museum of American History
Nicole Ivy, museum futurist, Center for the Future of Museums, American Alliance of Museums

Special Guests
Lotte Lent, assistant director, Museum Education Program, The George Washington University, Washington, DC
Elizabeth Varner, adjunct professor Robert H. McKinney School of Law at Indiana University

Moderator
Greg Stevens, assistant director, professional development, American Alliance of Museums
SPOTLIGHT: VOLUNTEER

By Manuel Cude- Pacheco

During my time as a docent for the Museum of Contemporary Art GA during Mario Petireina’s first solo exhibition: The Distance Between, I was fortunate to be part of the process for how patrons created knowledge through collective participation while learning about the exhibition and the role of the museum in the community. Working with a different audience each time demanded a mindful and dynamic approach which brought a refreshing element to my experience as a docent, truly making each session more interesting than the previous one.

The museum’s growing collection of art by Georgia artists is just one of many reasons I gravitated towards MOCA GA’s volunteer docent program, though the opportunity to work around their incredible pieces certainly was one of the most exciting aspects of my experience. I have found that it is important to note the vital role of the MOCA GA in the uphill struggle for representation of the arts in the region. As a volunteer and docent, the responsibility of preserving and promoting the legacy of these works becomes intimately personal.

Working with a variety of age groups was a valuable reminder of how important diverse perspectives and open dialogue is to community building within a contemporary museum. Though I anticipated the educational responsibilities of providing tours for patrons, I ultimately came to view my role as more closely resembling that of a facilitator or companion. Empowering visitors to engage in free-flowing discussion consistently resulted in valuable, insightful responses and ideas from which everyone could benefit. I found this incredibly helpful in shaping a constructive and positive museum experience. Often, visitors seemed unaware that they are equipped to engage with the work in an immersive and meaningful way; aiding patrons to talk about art was truly a gratifying experience. A remarkable point of departure to setting the stage before any tour was thinking about Phillip Yenawine’s and Abigail Housen’s techniques of Visual Thinking Strategies or VTS. By means of simple open-ended questions and building on the individual curiosity of each visitor, we can refocus the attention of the tour to be as much about the visitor as it is about the works of art. It is not only thoughtful to think about the differences in personalities and modes of learning of each member in your group but also crucial to embrace both the curiosity and needs of each patron.

Showing each group that I wanted to learn as much about them as they did about the work created an organic symbiotic relationship while eliminating the existing power dynamics between docent and audience. Younger groups for the most part seemed to want to experience the tour in terms of current technological relevance, while more mature audiences wanted more details about esoteric religious and historic events; in both opposing scenarios after exhausting all viable options to find an answer within the group, there was one infallible approach, the “let’s google it” technique. Not only did it have positive response, but apart from being an unexpected team-building technique what made it successful was the comfortability to connect their daily personas to their museum visiting personas; it was finally and officially okay not to have all the answers all the time in this tour.

On other occasions, I had the opportunity to work with first time visitors. Despite the shared sense of hesitation that I often sensed within these groups, again, for fear of expressing the wrong opinion or answer, exploring each work together through simple viewing exercises and the creation of an accepting environment proved invaluable in provoking discussion. Sometimes this involved positioning ourselves in a circle around a piece, walking the length of a sculptural piece multiple times, sharing a simple physical observation, etc.
By encouraging patrons to incorporate movement and personal perspectives into how they view the piece, I was more successful in communicating how the complexity of contemporary artwork sometimes demands a different type of scrutiny. Through sharing simple observations in an open forum, many patrons realized that others in their group shared a similar emotional reactions, visual associations, or affinities for a detail. By employing open dialogue groups were able move beyond their concerns for what they were expected to see and strengthen their initial interpretations in depth and diversity. Visitors were actively forming relationships with the works and one another, while most importantly having a memorable and beneficial experience.

Pairing mutual respect with inquisitiveness proved to be an empowering act when put into practice; not only were visitors able to experience tangible results in the gallery, they also gained insights that could be carried with them. This experience allowed me to reevaluate and expand my pedagogic approach to exploring new spaces and objects through active conversations with the public. Further, collaborating with patrons in creating a lasting impact in how the contemporary museum is ultimately understood, how people interact with one another, and how the artwork is activated through discussion is just one way volunteer docents can help their institutions and their community.

Manuel Cude- Pacheco
Previous Volunteer Docent
The Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia (MOCA GA)
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AAMV
UPDATES

• Planning is well under way for our next webinar about risk management in volunteer programs. Scheduled for late January 2018, with the final date to be confirmed in the next few weeks, this webinar will build upon our session at the 2017 AAM annual meeting. It will speak to important issues surrounding risk management while also providing lots of opportunities for audience participation.

• As a Board we’ve also been preparing for the 2018 AAM annual meeting in Phoenix as we do every year. We’ve submitted a number of session proposals and are also planning our annual networking luncheon. This year, though, we’re also planning a new evening social event. We hope you will join us in Arizona in May 2018, as we continue to try and create opportunities for those working with volunteers to come together.