

The Queen City Manifesto: The Potential for Civic Engagement in Local Folklife Museums

By

William Westerman, Ph.D.
Art Knows No Borders, Inc., Newark, NJ, U.S.A
artknob@yahoo.com

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"Hit in the face in the main street of Chongno, he goes as far as the Han River and then sends back reproachful glances." --Korean proverb

Most of the presentations at this ICOM general conference are concerned with the culturally and ethically important issue of the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. As a folklorist, naturally I would agree that preservation is a worthwhile goal in and of itself. But there is another side to how we deal with intangible cultural heritage, one that has gotten less mention in the program until today's papers in the ICME section. That is the question of how intangible cultural heritage can be offered back to the community in a way that is deeply enriching. By "community" I refer not only to tourists visiting museums but people who live in the area, and by "deeply enriching" I mean not just diverting or entertaining, but offering meaning in a spiritual, moral, or historical way, meaning that can alter perceptions and lives, can provoke thought or even action. This issue goes to the very nature of the mission of museums and the question of both what purpose, and whom, they serve.

This paper begins from the premise that oral history and local folklife are forms of intangible cultural heritage, and that they are valuable not just to tourists but to local residents. Museums can serve an essential role in the understanding of local history and tradition, because local topics are myriad estuaries in the flow of history, too numerous, too small, and too remote to attract the attention of those relatively few people who are willing to write books or articles on historical topics. What I hope to demonstrate is that museums can be centers of community education and community action, and that there is a place for them in civic life as vital as schools and clinics. We live in a world that, according to the writer Eduardo Galeano, "teaches us to suffer reality, not change it; to forget the past, not learn from it; to accept the future, not invent it."² I argue that museums of intangible cultural heritage, including ethnography, ethnology, and history, can become the primary locale where adults can begin to engage with others in that process of learning from the past and inventing the future.

The case study I will address concerns an oral history exhibit at a local history/historic house museum in a small urban area in the U.S. state of New Jersey. For the purpose of this talk, I will thinly disguise the identity of the city and its museum by referring to the town as "Queen City" and the museum as "The Darke House." In mid-2003, I found myself the Executive Director of the Queen City Historical Society, which included the responsibilities of running the Darke House Museum as well as historical programs all over town. Queen City is a city about one hour from New York City by train. It has a population of about fifty thousand people, of whom according to the census about two-thirds are African American, and one-quarter are Latino. It is relatively poor by New Jersey standards, and it saw a lot of its core downtown businesses leave in the past 35 years, with many vacant buildings, including department stores, as a result.

The Darke House had been built in 1746 by a colonial family and their six slaves. The house was the headquarters for George Washington during the Battle of the Bound Brook in the area. We know that he rested there, but it's not clear if he fell asleep, so we could not in good conscience boast that "George Washington Slept Here." After the original occupants left, the house was bought and expanded by the first President of the Chase Manhattan Bank, who used Queen City, like many wealthy industrialists from New York did, as a weekend getaway. The town became famous for its villas and its mansions for the New York elite, while at the same time an African American community began to grow in the 1840s. In the early 20th century, the house was purchased by a third family, of German extraction, and they lived in the house for a short time before the First World War broke out. A police raid during the War revealed that this family was allegedly involved in aiding the Germans, and they were driven out of town. A concerned group of local citizens formed to save the historic house from destruction, and they purchased the house in 1921 and immediately turned over ownership to the city, who continues to own the house to this day and rents it back to the Historical Society, which owns all the furnishings and contents.

In mid-2003 I was approached by the education director, Rebecca Williams, who wanted to put together a small exhibit commemorating the 40th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington, best known for being the rally in which Martin

Luther King, Jr. gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. We had a staff of only three persons, myself, Ms. Williams, and an education assistant. Although her job duties did not include curating exhibits, we had received a special grant from the state to pay for extra staff time over the summer, so, in my first executive decision I suggested that instead of just filling the exhibit with memorabilia collected from local residents who attended the March, that we conduct oral history interviews and have the exhibit consist of the words of the residents mounted alongside photo portraits of participants in the March from Queen City. During the spring and summer, Ms. Williams and I identified twelve people in the town who had gone to the March, nine black and three white, which was about the actual ratio of attenders in 1963. She conducted the interviews and transcribed and edited excerpts for the exhibit itself, and also found photographer Ronald K. Gray, a professor of filmmaking at New York University, who had attended the March as a teenager, and asked him to take the photo portraits. He lowered his fees, and set aside three days to conduct the shooting.

This was the first exhibit for which I had ever been Executive Director, having curated several on my own. So I was eager to provide the kind of management I would have wanted had I been the curator. I saw my role as facilitating the exhibit in a managerial capacity, providing a second set of editorial eyes, raising the necessary funds to make it possible, working jointly with Ms. Williams to develop the educational strategy, and doing what I could to see that the exhibit could reading groups around the city to talk about race and justice and the other issues raised by the March and the interviews. We put together an education committee, which included the Mayor's wife, as well as a lecturer from Rutgers University and the director of the county's historical programs. (The latter two were both added to the board later.) At the first meeting of the educational committee, the Mayor came to pick up his wife and stayed for the last hour. I was realizing the exhibit would have the potential to attract attention.

Ms. Williams had her hands full with conducting and transcribing twelve interviews, which as most of you know is a laborious process, while Mr. Gray had his film processed and selected images for printing. Meanwhile, I worked to raise money through grants, to book the exhibit around town and around the state, to write press releases, and to think about the opening event, scheduled for August 1st so that the exhibit would be up during the actual anniversary of the March, on August 28th. I also met during this time with the local State Assemblyman, who was, like the Mayor, African American but who was also his political rival. The Assemblyman warned me that he wanted our exhibits to bring people together and not be divisive, and hoped that we were developing projects that could go to his white constituent districts outside the city as well.

By the time the show opened, we had five other venues interested in showing the exhibit, and we had decided to develop a student study guide as well as the anthology for the adult groups. I decided we would use this exhibit to inaugurate an "oral history archive"; within the museum - to be named after the first large donor to come along - while Ms. Williams decided to produce a CD with excerpts from the twelve interviews. She was so excited about the project that while speaking about it with some friends a few weeks before the opening, one of them called his friends together and donated \$2,000 to the Historical Society earmarked for the exhibit. And, the local daily newspaper, with a circulation of over forty thousand, sent a reporter and photographer out the day before to cover the exhibit, so it would appear in the paper the day of the opening.

The opening evening was one of those humid New Jersey August evenings that guaranteed discomfort for all concerned. It had rained all day, and the temperature was about 32 degrees Celsius. Now, the Museum was not air-conditioned, and the Board turned down our request to rent a stand-alone air-conditioner for the evening; not only that but we blew a fuse running all the fans to keep the place reasonable. Still, nearly one hundred people showed up and stayed (we provided a catered reception table) for over two hours, most of them sweating visibly. The Mayor came, the State Assemblyman came, the local newspaper sent another reporter to cover the opening as news, and the narrators of the interviews spontaneously burst into song at one point, singing "We Shall Overcome" for the assembled guests and newspaper photographer. In my opening remarks I said, "John Lewis [head of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and now a congressman from Georgia], who was at the march, has talked about his vision of America as, what he calls, 'the beloved community.' We come together tonight to celebrate a major step toward that vision on its 40th anniversary. We hope that, through studying history, we as a historical society are able to propel that journey at least a few feet further." That was the idealist in me speaking; the realist in me was heartened by an anonymous matching donation that was announced at the opening by one of the guests, who offered up to \$1,000 if that much could be raised that evening - and we raised another \$1,400, plus his full matching gift. The exhibit had already paid for itself.

My hope was that our educational programs would break down what the theatre community calls "the fourth wall," the wall between the audience and the stage. Because we were a historical society that happened to run a museum, we had license to have our exhibits presented all over town. I envisioned our adult education discussions taking place in church basements, schools, the local health center, the library. I felt that both the experience of the March and its distance in time would allow people to talk safely about issues of race in the town, about current housing and income patterns, and maybe even about the race riots of 1967. What would happen, then, metaphorically speaking, if we broke down that "fourth wall" between the museum and its community, and sent the exhibit out to the streets. (One of the advantages, I might point out, of working with intangible heritage, was that the exhibit had no one-of-a-kind artifacts that were too risky to let out of the building.)

August is a slow month, culturally speaking, and we didn't expect much attention until the school year started again in September. But word got out about the exhibit. When the actual 40th anniversary of the March came, the New York Times excerpted one of our interviews for an article they did on the anniversary (I had emailed one of the editors), but on

the other hand, it was a total surprise when the CBS network's national news called two weeks later to tell us they had heard about the exhibit and were producing a story on the March and wanted to re-interview, on tape, as many of the narrators in our exhibit we could gather together. This little exhibit was getting national attention, which of course could help our fundraising even further. (A note to my non-U.S. colleagues: state support for museums is so limited in the U.S. that the job of many executive directors consists largely, if not mostly, of fundraising). And more funds equal more widespread educational programs and better materials. I also figured that the fact that CBS news was sending reporters to cover this exhibit was news itself, so I again notified the local daily, who sent another photographer and a reporter and put the exhibit on the top front page. (I am quick to point out that this is not mere publicity, but was part of the educational process, as it increased the awareness in the area of the importance of the March and the significance of its anniversary.)

Within a month of the show's opening, we had broken even financially and the show was booked for the next year and a half at eight venues, including schools, a library, a public health center, and several venues in other parts of the state. What's more, the powerful State Assemblyman, who had access to discretionary funds, had liked the exhibit so much that without our foreknowledge he featured it in his constituent newsletter that went out to thousands of households in the city and in the surrounding towns.

At this point I was able to turn back to fundraising for the educational materials: the two publications we wanted to do, and the edited CD of the excerpts. We had laid the groundwork for the exhibit, much more successfully than we anticipated, and now we were free to devote our energy to bringing the exhibit out into the community. As the only museum in the town (the nearest in any direction was a half hour away by car), there was a particular mission to be an educational recourse to the community, especially children in the local school district but also recognizing the often overlooked potential for adult education. Furthermore, the Board had given me instructions that we needed to get the community involved and increase membership (which we had increased around 10% since the show opened), and now we had an opening event that had been easily two-thirds African American.

I was very interested in learning how and to what extent local heritage can matter in current times, and how a local history museum can become a relevant cultural institution in an economically impoverished area. One day Ms. Williams said to me, after the exhibit opened, "Our new motto should be, 'Exhibits that matter.'" Beyond that, as a folklorist whose primary interest was in the arts, I wondered what other aspects of cultural heritage could also be shown and discussed in relevant ways, how that could be accomplished, and what the outcomes could be in the community. Although I had come to the job with the hypothesis that local history could be vital to people's lives, I had not seen it in practice until I saw the interest generated by this exhibit. I was also struck by the reaction of the narrators themselves to the exhibit and the concomitant attention it brought them, and, more importantly, that it brought to the (in many ways) unfinished agenda of the March forty years earlier. The importance of this moment in history was underscored, for example, in the words of interviewee Donald Van Blake, who lived in Queen City when it was still segregated. He said that after the March,

we thought...it's going to be different from here on in...and it was, because people looked at you differently. Oh, yeah, they looked at you, they saw you...before, they didn't see black people. I remember one friend I had, who was a storekeeper on Park Avenue... I was a painter, and he supplied paint... and he was saying, "Donald, you know, I wish things would go back to the way they were...settle down and go back to the way they were," and I told him, "I hope they never the hell go back the way they were!" And he looked at me, and he realized what I meant.

By creating the vehicle for the collection of oral history and, if you will, local historical heritage, we had opened up veins of memory, and at the same time avenues to engage the community in the discussion and re-interpretation of history, and even possibly social action based on that experience.

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Full disclosure: Two months after the opening of the exhibit, I was fired. The Board, or more accurately, those members of the Board invited to the October meeting,³ decided that the Society was not ready to have an executive director and really wanted to have an office manager or administrative assistant to oversee their programs. There had been some indications this was coming. The first email I received from the President after the opening made no mention of the exhibit or the success of the opening, but did point out that two of the building's nine fire extinguishers had not been returned from being repaired before the opening, and that the company doing the inspections had missed another, which was now one day past its inspection due date. More significantly, she complained in a later email about the amount I had budgeted to the March exhibit and its programs, adding that "the mission of the [historical society] is education."; After I was dismissed, my co-worker, the education director Ms. Williams who had curated the exhibit, resigned, and six board members either resigned or went on indefinite leave of absence, including all the African American and Latino members of the board, with one notable exception. (Anyone who would like more details of this can contact me personally.)

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The conclusions I drew from this episode were bittersweet. If the exhibit had indeed been successful, it was perhaps successful in ways that were too threatening, perhaps in political terms or perhaps just in board-staff-hierarchy terms, or

more likely, both. I was able to glean from the kinds of exhibits the President proposed that she wanted more colonial period exhibits, Victorian costume exhibits, and the kind of fare that is more typical of historic house museums patronized by weekend day-trippers and schoolchildren who are taught to be grateful to see old things. Not that there is anything wrong with diversion once in a while. But Ms. Williams and I had uncovered a real truth, I think, that in our zeal we had hoped to find (but at least in my case I had underestimated): that local history, and the study and ethnographic understanding of local cultural heritage more broadly, is a tremendous, irreplaceable resource for developing critical thinking, for understanding how things got to be the way they are, and even for effecting social change. We didn't get that far, but we saw openings.

Though recognized as cultural institutions, museums are rarely considered a component of community life as essential as a strong educational system, social services, and safe streets, although they do figure in abstract "quality of life" calculations, like nightlife and restaurants. Just how important are cultural institutions? Recent research into "civic engagement," such as that conducted by Robert Putnam, has suggested that museums, like other cultural activities, create a sense of social cohesion and this so-called civic engagement - getting people to work together to improve their communities. Museums do this in much the same way that choral singing groups do; it's not so much the content but the activity and the being-together that has the impact on community cohesion. Putnam's Harvard-based Saguro Seminar website, for example, notes that

What .. art museums [can] do to increase visitors'; social capital [includes] staying open later, creating singles nights, musical soirees, theme dinners, and group travel options to attract and entertain a wider audience. And museums are inventing programs that reach out into their communities... The Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio realized that with employees staying late and socializing at work, workplaces could provide "access to existing social and communications networks that will help [the museum] reach new audiences."⁴

Putnam's group's collective heart may be in the right place, but what is missing from his discussion is the fact that the content of museum exhibits and educational activities can affect the community. Bringing people together socially, and bringing people together to discuss art and culture, both of which his website mentions, are indeed vital functions in the community. Discussion can lead to action. But exhibits with challenging content that directly ties in to people's intangible cultural heritage, preserving it but also working with it as a sculptor works with clay, can go much deeper in addressing the needs and aspirations of local communities. To me the vision has to be a collaborative one, between the locals and the professionals (for lack of better terms), between those who lives are being studied and displayed and those who make their living doing the studying and displaying.

The Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli has written eloquently about the need for "research as an experiment in equality."⁵ I think one of the benefits we have barely begun to reap in the new movement towards collaborative museums and exhibits is that in doing so we encourage active, as well as activist, participation in the dynamics of community life. Donald Van Blake, whom I quoted earlier, said it most succinctly when he said he hoped things "never the hell go back the way they were." What I hope to suggest today is that through the bold selection of exhibit topics, executed with integrity, it is possible to involve the community in ways that go beyond superficial measures of attendance and go beyond window dressing. Reaching out to the community really means reaching into the community, and I would go so far as to suggest that it is intangible cultural heritage that provides a greater opportunity for this than decontextualized *objets d'art*. We need to think creatively about taking exhibits out to the streets, about breaking down that fourth wall in our educational programs, about privileging the words of those whose heritage is being displayed, about rethinking the aesthetic, the historical, and the community functions of the museum, and potentially about using museum space as a site for community organizing, to meet community needs. I have only offered one anecdotal example today, but one in which donations, attendance, membership, press, and touring opportunities all increased as a result of taking a bold stance. Those who equate the prestige, interest, and fun of museums with timidity and inoffensiveness should take note. People attend museums for a variety of reasons, and when museums matter to them culturally and politically, they feel an ownership which strengthens the importance of what we do and our resolve that we can do more. They may not always agree with what they see, they may come to different conclusions - but there's nothing wrong with that. As John Kuo Wei Tchen, an oral historian and the founder of New York's Museum of Chinese in the Americas has written, the museum experience can be a dialogue with the community, rather than the presentation of an inflexible master narrative.⁶

What did I learn in Queen City? I learned that we are lucky to be in a profession where our work matters in direct proportion to the degree we want it to. I learned that heritage is often as much about the kind of future we want to create for ourselves as it is about the past. I learned that people are hungry for "exhibits that matter", and that the news media are often willing (if not always) to cover cultural events that are themselves news as well as heritage. All this may seem counterintuitive, even paradoxical, especially given that I lost my job in the process. But neither social change nor artistic achievement comes without some setbacks. What is important to remember is that what Nobel Peace Prize laureate Kim Dae-Jung called "conscience in action" is as important in museums as it is anywhere else.

Notes

1 Thanks to Rebecca Williams and Jesse Levine for their assistance all along the way, from the exhibit through to helping assemble images for this presentation. Thanks also to Choi Hak-Beom who helped with assembling the Power Point visuals.

Quoted by Prof. Chong-wha Chung (http://cogweb.ucla.edu/Abstracts/TokyoForum_96.html). Another version can be found in *How Koreans Talk*, by Sang-Hun Choe and Christopher Torchia. Seoul: Eun Haeng Na Mu, 2002.

2 *Upside Down*. Trans. by Mark Fried. New York: Picador, 2000, p. 8.

3 A nice historical irony was that this paper was delivered on the first Wednesday of October, 2004, the one year anniversary of the Board meeting at which I was fired.

4 (<http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/mtg7.html>)

5 *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

6 John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Creating a Dialogic Museum: The Chinatown History Museum Experiment," in Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).

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