

Coming Home to VSA

I'm writing this column at the beginning of Homecoming Week in my village of Oak Park, and I find that I'm looking forward to the festivities—tissue paper floats, marching bands, parading huskies (can you guess our high school mascot?) and all. This is a bit unexpected for me. I am more a farmers market, library, art openings and concert-goer than high school cheerleader. Our family has lived in Oak Park for six years, and we've never paid attention to Homecoming Week. Yet somehow homecoming captured my imagination this year, and as I think about it, I owe it all to VSA.

I recently realized that I had a meaningful homecoming experience of my own this year—and it happened at the VSA annual conference in Columbus. Before I go any further, let me quickly set the record straight lest you get the wrong impression of a VSA conference. No, the VSA conference does not include floats and marching bands; you needn't watch dogs on parade; and though we do recognize April Award winners, there is no voting for VSA king and queen.

Rather, the homecoming I experienced in Columbus was not so much about festivities as it was a genuine sense of "coming home"—home to the roots established early in my career. In those days I was fortunate enough to meet people like Chan Screven, Marcella Brenner and Joan Madden. I read the work of Stephen DeBorhegyi, Arthur Melton, Alma Wittlin, Duncan Cameron and Nelson Graburn. My first job was conducting evaluation research with Bob and Barbara Wolf (then, Barbara Tymitz). They had me

observing and interviewing visitors by using naturalistic methods, and we wrote reports "in their [the visitors'] words."

Thanks to these influences I found a professional "home" among people who had respect for visitors, passion for lifelong learning, the desire to ask questions and dig deeper, and the ability to articulate the relationship between what a museum, or any place for informal learning, offers and what benefits it does or does not provide its visitors.

With this solid visitor-centered foundation in place, I went on to work that focused on education and evaluation. And, as so often happens in the museum world, I eventually moved into administration and management. Yet, even so firmly grounded in theories of learning, audience research and advocacy for the visitor, I failed more times than I care to recount at attempts to have visitors' needs and perspectives find their rightful place as priorities were set and decisions made. I conceded that it was going to take more than I could muster at the time to make a compelling case and provide the concrete evidence and skills necessary to the task at hand. I needed more and more data, more authoritative articles, more support from colleagues, more examples of what really works and why, and more pressure from external forces to demonstrate public service. I needed a community of like-minded professionals.

I found all of that—and more—at the VSA conference. Data exist. Ideas are plentiful. The dialogue is impressive.



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The visitor is front and center. Challenging questions about results, outcomes and impact are on the table. I was "back home" among a community of colleagues, and it felt very good. I discovered a renewed commitment to the values and work that this association supports, and I think it's time to put VSA on parade.

Let's take a lesson from homecoming activities, like the ones taking place all over the U.S. this fall, and build some team spirit and sense of community of our own by planning events that bring people together and remind them of their roots. I like to think of them as "random acts of visitor support."

Send a study with interesting results to a colleague. Host a brown bag lunch focused on an issue of *VSToday*. Upgrade your basic membership to an institutional membership and share VSA conferences, workshops and publications with others. Start a discussion group for VSA members in your city or region. Write a book review for *VSToday* and send a copy to your colleagues. Join with another institution to collect and share data. Introduce your state agencies to visitor studies. Basically, do something—large or small to keep focus on the visitor and to encourage investigations that will deepen our understanding and result in improved practice and greater impact.

VSA provides resources, publications, conference paper abstracts, workshops, a directory and an annual conference. I encourage each one of us to use them to garner more support for visitor studies and ultimately, improve public service. If you have ideas that already work, let us know. If you want to announce something, let us know. If you are looking for collaborators, let us know. Contact me: memunley@aol.com or any board member with your ideas and reports of your activities. We'll do whatever we can to expand this community and support its work.

For timely reports on VSA activities, look for the monthly electronic letter from the president to each VSA member. It arrives near the end of each month. We'll send a print copy of the letter to members with no e-mail addresses.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Visitor Studies Today Needs You

EDITOR POSITION

Chris Parsons will be resigning as editor of *Visitor Studies Today* in the fall of 2004. VSA is looking for an editor to replace her. The plan is to have someone help with the 2004 issues, then take over in 2005. If you're interested or want more information, contact VSA President Mary Ellen Munley at memunley@aol.com or VSA Publications Chairperson Conny Graft at cgraft@cwf.org. It's a great way to get to know professionals in visitor studies internationally.

REVIEWERS

If you like reading and keeping current with visitor studies' publications or media, then George Hein could use your help. George, *VSToday's* Book Review Editor, is always looking for new books and other publications or media of interest to our readers, and for reviewers to review them. If you're interested, contact George at ghein@lesley.edu.

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