Summer in the City

Squeals of laughter fill the air. Campers swarm their counselors asking them to sign their t-shirts. Art projects are taken down from their displays and dispersed to their owners. Hugs, phone numbers, and promises of “See you next year!” are shared among newfound friends. The fifteenth year of the Penn Museum’s summer camp, Anthropologists in the Making, has just come to a close.

Each summer, around 230 children between the ages of 7 to 13 participate in the camp, transporting them through time and across continents. Organized by the Museum’s Community Engagement Department, the annual camp runs...
from late June through mid-August. Each week highlights a different theme, offering campers the opportunity to enjoy one or all eight weeks. With the Museum’s galleries as the backdrop, campers delight in the mythology, dress, dance, music, cooking, art, and customs from both long ago civilizations and modern cultures. Each week is filled with gallery tours, arts and crafts, games and theatrics, scavenger hunts, and special guest performances, which allow the participants to fully explore the breadth of humanity.

With session themes such as “Bring Out Your Dead” and “Mesopotamian Mysteries,” encounters with Roman legionnaire re-enactors, and art projects involving tomb offerings and sarcophagi, one quickly learns that the Penn Museum’s camp is not your typical summer camp. Where else can a child participate in a mock excavation of the prehistoric settlement of Ban Chiang in Thailand, uncovering replicas of artifacts found at the actual site? Or touch a Peruvian mummy, participate in an Etruscan divination, or play a trade game based on the Silk Road? The extensive resources of the Museum, found in its galleries, staff, and faculty, provide a wealth of experiential learning opportunities for camp participants.

The highlight of each camp session is the Showcase of Learning, a performance given by the children and camp staff that brings each week to a close. This event provides an opportunity for the campers to demonstrate all they have learned during the week in a fun, creative, and sometimes downright outlandish way. A favorite from the past few years has been a Roman gladiatorial show. In 2008, the performance began with the sound of trumpet flares as Emperor Mathius (played by the Museum’s Chief of Staff Jim Mathieu, below) entered the “amphitheater” dressed in a purple trabea toga and laurel wreath; he was surrounded by his attendants who then gave
him a wealth of gifts including fans, gold coins, food, and modern twists such as an American Express card and Olive Garden gift certificate. The event continued with the campers acting out short skits from scripts they had written themselves about the assassination of Julius Caesar, The Aeneid, and the Trojan War. In between skits, the audience was treated to uproarious gladiatorial bouts which pitted counselors against one another, wearing elaborate costumes created by their campers, and using tridents, spears, and shields constructed of aluminum foil, cardboard, and foam. By the end of the event, one gladiator received his freedom, and everyone had a wonderful time.

Anthropologists in the Making summer camp brings together children from a variety of backgrounds and interests, and provides them with an opportunity to learn in a fun and engaging way. It gives them a sense of ownership of the Penn Museum, and they delight in showing their family and friends around the galleries and sharing their new knowledge. A spark is ignited in each camper, as he or she explores the history and diversity of humankind and how all they have learned applies to their own lives. It would not be a surprise to see the research of one of these budding anthropologists or archaeologists in the pages of Expedition one day.

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Jenn Reifsteck (left) and Erin Jensen.