Bringing the Museum into Neighborhoods

The Free Library of Philadelphia has several branches near schools that participate in Unpacking the Past. A natural way to continue service to these students and their families is to provide fun learning opportunities in these community spaces. The Penn Museum brings replica objects to public libraries and provides hands-on opportunities for families to connect with them.

The Walnut West Library explored Lenni-Lenape culture, with families learning about the Native people of this region and designing Wampum belts inspired by historical documents. Kingsessing and Cobbs Creek Library participants celebrated African American history by understanding more about their African roots. At Kingsessing, children studied masks and textiles through a special “Storytime Expeditions,” then made their own kanga, traditional garments of East Africa. Cobbs Creek regularly provides literacy support for surrounding preschools, so our fables about African animals were a special treat. The young participants were so enthusiastic that the Unpacking the Past educators stayed an extra hour at this session.

A Legacy of Developing Student Diplomats

Students from the Philadelphia region got a true taste of world cultures this spring in a partnership between the Penn Museum and The World Affairs Council of Philadelphia. The Council is a nonpartisan educational organization dedicated to engaging people on matters of national and international significance.

For decades, the Junior United Nations Program has taught regional middle school students how to act as foreign diplomats, providing training sessions that culminate in a mock United Nations summit. A deep dive in the Archives reveals this partnership existed with the Museum in the 1960s. This year, the Council and the Penn Museum teamed up to provide students with an intercultural adventure. Over 1,400 students, parents, and teachers—from regional schools in New Jersey and Pennsylvania—visited the Museum on January 5–6, 2017. The students explored the galleries with guided tours and received special talks by International Classroom program educators on Kenyan traditions, Egyptian travel, and Chinese language and history.

According to the 2015 American Community Survey, 16% of residents in Philadelphia County have some form of a disability and nearly one in five of all Americans have a disability. As the cultural sector focuses on more inclusive practices, the Penn Museum offers an array of opportunities to welcome and connect with people of all abilities.

In the last few years, the Museum has offered Egypt-centered Touch Tours for groups of people who are blind or have low vision in conjunction with Philly Touch Tours; recently, the partnership released a Rome version of the tour. The Museum also provides audio description at the “Great Beasts of Legend” lecture series. In addition, the Museum has worked with the Penn Memory Center to create programs for adults with dementia. The Learning Programs Department now offers an array of school programs for children with diverse special needs, including students with developmental and intellectual disabilities.

Since January 2015, the Museum has served over 1,800 K-12 students with disabilities through its accessible programs. Three new family programs were offered this spring: “Evening Expeditions,” a modified version of the popular “40 Winks with the Sphinx” program; a new “Archaeological Adventures Homeschool Day” with a focus on children with autism; and “Tactile Trip around the World,” a program for those with visual impairments.

Many of the new accessible programs were developed by Megan Becker, Access Program Specialist and GRoW Annenberg Museum and School Educator, the Museum’s first Special Education Certified staff member. Kevin Schott, the Education Programs Manager, is spearheading programs for people who are blind or have low vision. The Penn Museum is thrilled to offer these new connection points for visitors of all abilities.

Twenty-five regional teachers received training on contemporary political issues in April as the Museum hosted a professional development opportunity in partnership with Brown University and the Penn Middle East and South Asian Centers. An expert teacher trained in Brown University’s award-winning Choices curricula offered approaches to the topics “The Middle East in Transition: Questions for U.S. Policy” and “Indian Independence and the Question of Partition.” The workshop introduced teachers to dialogue-based approaches for teaching international issues in their high school classrooms. The day concluded with a lecture from Dr. Salam Al Kuntar, Co-Curator of Cultures in the Crossfire: Stories from Syria and Iraq, along with a special overview of this newly opened Museum exhibition.