Preventing Burn-Out

"The San Antonio Zoo recognizes its Volunteers and Docents for all they do during National Volunteer Week."

Incentives and Benefits

- Giving Thanks
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Giving Thanks

There is an expression that goes, “If it’s free, it’s not worth anything.” Well, that may be true of some things, but not of the volunteers who work in our profession. Volunteers have become essential to the operations of a vast majority of museums, historic sites, zoos, aquariums, gardens, and parks.

Many facilities owe their very existence to the volunteers who crafted a mission and purpose for their institutions and formed the first boards of trustees. Today, these stalwarts of personal commitment and generosity serve in all capacities, and throughout all levels, of their institutions. In addition to acting as trustees, volunteers work with (and as) directors, curators, librarians, maintenance crews, and preparators. They staff information desks, provide legal and financial advice to administrators, plan and execute fundraising events, and conduct interpretive programs of collections and exhibitions.

Regardless of whether the dedicated people who implement public programming are known as “docents,” “interpreters,” “lecturers,” “guides,” or “explainers,” they function as educators and are their institutions’ most visible and publicly accessible representatives. Often, they are the only source of direct personal contact between an institution and its visiting public. For this reason, the caliber and quality of the docents’ performance is inexorably linked to the public’s perception of an institution.

Why Is “Thanks” Necessary?
The integral relationship of docent performance to public perception, as well as the munificent number of hours freely given in service, warrant that every volunteer educator should feel supported in his or her quest for job competence and satisfaction.

With the exception of preserving and protecting the collection, there is no greater purpose for a museum, historic site, zoo, park, aquarium, or garden than its public programming. The American Association of Museums states in its code of ethics that the profession places “a renewed emphasis on the historic American concepts of museums as public trusts and museum work as service to society.” If public service is truly fundamental to every institutional purpose, then logic dictates that those who execute these responsibilities should be of fundamental importance, too.

Only the most callous among us would fail to recognize that volunteer time is precious. Every volunteer minute spent in the service of an institution is a gift. If that gift were considered a cash contribution, these “donors” would be courted, exalted, and revered. Unfortunately, familiarity often strips these “donors” of such a special status.

Why Docents Volunteer
Knowing that docents are essential to the health, vitality, functions, and future of an institution requires that these facilities invest in their volunteer corps. Those who do not risk falling short of achieving a fully-realized, robust institution.

Creating the appropriate environment for docents requires an understanding of why volunteers are drawn toward museum work in general, and educational programming in particular. Certainly, the reasons are many and varied. Some that overlap include: the camaraderie of fellow volunteers, the meaningfulness of the work, and a desire to serve their community.

As the reasons for working in the educational arena are further refined, however, they focus in on a desire to:

- work with the general public and/or young people;
- learn more about the institutional subject matter;
- stimulate interest for the subject matter among others; and
- foster enthusiasm and support for their institution.

Volunteer docents tend to be highly motivated. Most will return to their voluntary responsibilities year after year regardless of the ups and downs of institutional circumstances and staff changes. The fact that these people remain dedicated does not necessarily mean that they are satisfied, nor does it mean that they can be neglected or taken for granted. The difference between a volunteer corps that thrives from one that simply survives is immense. It is a difference that will have a real impact upon the quality of institutional programming.

Docents who are appreciated, who know that they are respected for their efforts and the work they do, have a better “self-image” than those who perceive feelings of ambivalence or disdain. Having a healthy, strong
self-image leads to personal confidence, and confidence leads to a willingness to try and to increased chances of success.

Which Factors are Important?
In addition to feeling appreciated, volunteers want to feel competent and qualified to fulfill their responsibilities. Their desire to work with the public and to foster interest in the subject matter demands that they be provided with opportunities for professional development and the resources for improvement and growth.

A Sense of Professionalism. Docents need to feel that they are a professional part of their organization. Feelings of inclusiveness are essential to developing a team spirit. Each new touring season should begin with an opportunity to hear from the institution's director. As the chief executive officer, the director's presence before these volunteers conveys respect and transmits an appropriate sense of importance for educational activities. Access to the director should also provide volunteers with an overview of where the institution is heading and how that direction integrates with the institution's mission.

Competence. Naturally, docent training is of the utmost importance. Training serves several purposes. It gives docents the information base to feel comfortable and confident about their own performance. It provides them with the skills to effectively communicate with various audiences and to fulfill their institution's public programming goals. And, training satisfies their personal desire to learn more about the subject, which is a strong motivating factor for volunteering.

Docents need to be knowledgeable about their institution's collections and special exhibitions. In order to gain this level of understanding, docents should meet regularly with the curatorial staff in order to learn about the exhibitions, objects, artifacts, and living things that the institution collects. Curators are the appropriate staff members to explain how exhibition choices are made; how the exhibit theme or focus is revealed; and how objects relate to one another. Curators can also provide docents with all necessary scholarly information, historical background, and scientific principles and theories.

Access to Information. Docents want to feel knowledgeable! They are eager for information; it is one of their main motivating reasons for volunteering. Institutions should provide docents with plenty of routes for acquiring it. Docents should receive copies of handouts, catalogues, handbooks, and monographs. There should be a docent reference area set aside in the library. This area would contain material such as periodicals and texts that elaborate upon current exhibitions or areas of institutional focus; copies of AAM's Museum News, AASLH's History News, or other subject-relevant publications; issues of The Docent Educator; a copy of The Best of The Docent Educator; pedagogical reference books; and an information exchange where docents can share their lesson plans, anecdotes, and insights.

An Understanding of Teaching. Teachers do not (and should not) use all the information they possess. Information must always be tailored to the audience and presented for an educationally sound purpose. Information that is not put to a higher purpose is reduced to trivia. Therefore, training must encompass educational principles and provide appropriate methodologies. Understanding how to teach and how to effectively communicate with various audiences is training docents should receive from the education depart-

Continued on next page.
Giving Thanks

Continued from previous page.

Education staff should teach by example, modeling the same techniques they expect their docents to employ.

Being an effective and competent educator is primary to being successful and experiencing the rewards inherent in teaching. People whose responsibilities are static tend to become disenchanted more rapidly than those whose responsibilities are dynamic. Teaching is a dynamic process. Merely repeating information is not dynamic, nor is it teaching.

The primary purpose of The Docent Educator is to improve teaching skills. It is the only journal devoted solely to the professional growth of those who teach with institutional collections. Every docent serving in an institutional program should be provided with, or (if economics demand) urged to take out their own subscription to, this publication. There should be regular discussions among volunteers, and with staff, about the topics and techniques examined within each issue’s pages.

Visiting consultants and experts provide docents with an exciting change of pace and a new “voice.” Going to the effort and expense of bringing in a visiting specialist for a workshop increases the volunteers’ feelings of worth. Additionally, it presents perspectives other than those of the immediate staff. The most advantageous visiting guest is one who would reinforce the education department’s goals, speak with knowledge of what docents do, and who can model teaching techniques using the collection directly.

Docents also enjoy the camaraderie of their fellow docents. Events that bring docents together, such as field trips to other institutions, travel opportunities, and docent symposiums can be great morale boosters and an opportunity to speak with others who share similar responsibilities.

Showing Appreciation

Docents should be thanked for their efforts and dedication. While volunteers do not work for monetary compensation, they do expect to be valued. Society tends to devalue what comes freely, but in the case of volunteers, such an assumption is insulting and, ultimately, unnecessary. Respecting the fact that time is important and could be put to many purposes, and knowing that these volunteers choose to give of themselves, their time, and their energies, should never fail to impress.

While acknowledging the value of time, let’s not forget that a docent’s time should not be wasted. Make sure that docents are notified of tour cancellations or other shifts in scheduling whenever possible.

Thanking docents can come in many forms — and should! First, and perhaps foremost, is expressing gratitude verbally. That expression should not only come from members of the education department, but also from the director, curators, and trustees who benefit from their efforts. Docents should also be thanked by being provided with materials that make them more successful and their performance more gratifying.

However an institution chooses to do so, saying “thank you” is good form. It is polite and appropriate. Incidentally, but not insignificantly, those who feel appreciated are more likely to go the extra mile when called upon, and far less likely to experience fatigue or premature burn-out.

Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor

Submit an Article!

Publish and share your teaching ideas and techniques. Address one of the following themes of our upcoming issue.

"Hands-On!" Activities that Encourage Direct Participation Winter 1998
Submission deadline: September 1, 1998

Constructing Relationships with Schools Spring 1999
Submission deadline: December 1, 1998

Teaching and Technology Summer 1999
Submission deadline: March 1, 1999

Send your text and photos to:
The Docent Educator P.O. Box 2080 Kamuela, HI 96743-2080.
To receive writer’s guidelines send us a self-addressed, stamped envelope.
All articles are edited for publication.
Study Trips as Educational Incentives

by Susan Miner

For over a decade, the docents at the Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum have been taking occasional study trips to visit out-of-town museums whose programs and exhibits have something to offer for professional development. Those of us accustomed to giving tours enjoy being on the receiving end of the educational offerings at museums, near and far, whose collections and programs relate to our own.

When we were developing our tour for third graders, we visited the Kansas Museum of History in Topeka to learn about the Wichita Indians' life on the prairie, which became the focus of our tour. We were able to adapt many topics and techniques, based on their research and experience.

Our trip to Colonial Williamsburg took us not only to another region but also to a different era. While we reveled in the beauty of the colonial village in full Christmas glory, we spent part of each day observing school group tours, interviewing education staff, chatting with interpreters, and finding ways to incorporate their approach into our house tours of a recreated Victorian cottage.

By the time we set out for Massachusetts, we were ready to tackle Boston, Deerfield, and Old Sturbridge Village, where we again arranged special visits with educators who gave us insights into a variety of programs. The middle school tour at the Harrison Gray Otis House in Boston gave us the courage to begin the planning that eventually resulted in our own eighth grade tour in Wichita history.

We have also taken trips to see a particular exhibit, such as our visit to "A City Comes of Age: Chicago in the 1890s" at the Chicago Historical Society, which greatly enhanced our appreciation of the late Victorian urban scene at a time when Wichita's aspirations were also booming. On other occasions, we have focused on

Those of us accustomed to giving tours enjoy being on the receiving end of the educational offerings at museums, near and far, whose collections and programs relate to our own.

As you can imagine, we fill every day with activity, often offering choices so that small groups can take in different sites or proceed at their own pace. We do travel together, stay at the same hotel, and plan most dinners and evenings out as a group. While we each pay our own expenses, we find that going with colleagues sharing many of the same interests does enhance our enjoyment and stimulate our learning.

Another type of trip that offers an outstanding educational opportunity is attendance at the biennial National Docent Symposium. Since the Symposium first included docents from non-art museums, we have sent at least one representative to each of these excellent conferences. The exciting ideas shared at these meetings with our peers from across the country always spark new notions of how to improve our training, hone our skills, boost our creativity, and maintain our dedication to good museum education. The next Symposium is scheduled for Philadelphia, October 2-5, 1999, and we are already planning a docent study trip to the Brandywine River museums in conjunction with that event.

(For further information, contact: Philadelphia Museum of Art, National Docent Symposium, Volunteer Services Department, PO Box 7646, Philadelphia, PA 19010-7646.)

The benefits to the individual of study trips can vary from pleasant diversion to serious scholarship. (I was able to use information from our visit to Old Sturbridge Village in my master's degree project.) And the museum gains the renewed loyalty of docents who have become travel buddies with shared memories of exciting museum visits, full of new enthusiasm for creating great tours of their own.

Susan Miner is Education Director at the Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum in Wichita, KS, which is her travel base for docent study trips.
Killing with Kindness

Do Rewards Defeat Their Purpose?

... a goody given unconditionally is not really a reward at all. A reward, by definition, is a desired object or event made conditional on having fulfilled some criterion: only if you do this will you get that. If I promise to give you a banana tomorrow, that is not a reward. If I promise to give you a banana tomorrow for helping me out today, that is a reward — and if I don’t give it to you, you will probably feel as if you are being punished. To avoid having this happen, I must avoid giving you things on a contingent basis. (Rewards as Punishment, page 53)

I was new to teaching. Margaret was new to our school. After the class’s first visit to the school library to check out books, Margaret confided in me: “In my old school, we got M&Ms’s for every book we read.”

I told her I thought that was very nice, but “... here we just read books because we like to.” Satisfied with my explanation, Margaret and the rest of my students usually checked out and read the maximum number of books they were allowed each week. Sometimes one or more would not check out a book, explaining that they were reading one from the public library or one from their own collection. Even though I knew the latest behavior motivation techniques from my recent college courses, I never had to “motivate” these children to read; I often had to remind them to put their books away to begin their classwork.

A few years later, Pizza Hut developed an ingenious and well-meaning program for encouraging children to read. It’s called, “Book-It,” and it is used in thousands of classrooms across the United States.

“Book-It” rewards with a free pizza all children who read a predetermined number of books each month. For classes where everyone meets their quota each month, a special class pizza party is awarded. Again, most of my “average” readers met their quota each month and won their pizza. Poor readers showed no improvement in their reading habits. The most interesting phenomenon, however, was the fact that few of the avid, insatiable readers ever met their goal. Some simply stopped reading altogether; others refused to produce the required proof that they had read.

Our class never succeeded in winning a class pizza party, and the “villain” was usually one of my most voracious readers who just forgot he had a goal and spent the entire month reading one book — generally an “adult” novel with 300 plus pages!

Experiences such as this during my last thirty years in public and private school classrooms and in museum education programs have convinced me that using rewards to motivate is counterproductive. In fact, I believe one of the reasons museum education is often more effective than typical classroom education is the lack of a reward system!

I don’t think rewards should ever be used in docent programs. This conviction did not come easily. My undergraduate and graduate studies in education occurred during the 60’s and 70’s — prime time for Skinner boxes, token economies, and other versions of behavior modification. Even the studies we read toward the end of the second decade, that indicated that token economies didn’t really work, were dismissed as “faulty research,” “surprising results,” or “puzzling.”

The first psychologist to articulate the theory that would come to be known as operant conditioning was probably Edward Thorndike. In 1898, he proposed the Law of Effect that states, in essence, behavior that leads to a positive consequence will be repeated. In the 1930’s and 1940’s, B.F. Skinner began his operant conditioning studies with rats and pigeons. Receiving a reinforcement (reward) after a behavior Skinner wanted his lab animals to repeat, enabled the rats and pigeons to “learn” to navigate mazes and press levers to receive food. Skinner proposed that humans were different from animals only in the degree of their sophistication, not in how they learned. He even devised a Skinner box for infants, a controlled environment in which his younger daughter spent much of her first two years.

Who was I to argue with a Harvard professor? Nevertheless, I wrestled with what I had been taught, with conventional wisdom, and what I saw happening in my relationships with children.

Grades, of course, are the most obvious forms of punishment-reward system going. And, while there did appear to be students who worked hard for A’s, there also seemed to be at least one in every class to whose parents you kept saying, “Johnny really isn’t working up to his potential.” Translated from teacherese, that means, “Johnny is smarter than anyone else in this class; he reads what he wants to read; he studies what he wants to study; he doesn’t turn in his homework or assignments, so I can’t give him an A; he’ll probably turn out to be another Bill Gates!”

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We also had annual school-wide drives to see who could bring in the most canned food to help the "less fortunate" at Thanksgiving. At first, classes were just encouraged to share at this time of year. Then, a new element was introduced. The class bringing in the greatest amount of food won a popcorn-and-Cokes party. I noticed that, throughout the years, the amount of food donated to these campaigns actually decreased. My students expressed very little interest in winning the party prize, consequently they brought minimal contribution. Maybe if the prize had been bigger!

It's difficult to believe that rewards don't motivate, that they may instead actually diminish intrinsic motivation. After all, a book listing just some of the awards given throughout the world is a huge reference volume you can barely lift from its self. The Silver Buffalo Distinguished Eagle Scout Award (the "...only award made by the Boy Scouts of America that has no specific course of action, tests to be met, or training as a requirement; rather it honors committed service to young people.") was first given, in 1926, to Sir Robert Baden-Powell, Scouting's founder or, as the award put it, "Chief Scout of the World."
The first Nobel Prize for Peace was awarded Jean Henri Dunant and Frederic Passy, the organizers of the Geneva Conventions of 1863 and 1864 and the International Red Cross, which those Conventions produced. The Woman of Conscience Award, a $1,500 prize funded by Clairol, was first awarded to Rachel Carson, environmentalist and author of Silent Spring. Since these were the first recipients of these awards, surely they did not work to receive them. Did the winners who followed do their good works in order to win prizes?

Prior to the recent Winter Olympics, in which she and partner Jerod Swallow finished in seventh place, ice dancer Elizabeth Punsalan was quoted on the subjective and widely criticized judging of her event. "At some point you just stop caring about placement," she said. "You just do it because you love it."

Numerous studies, notably those by Edward Deci and Mark Lepper, have indeed indicated that extrinsic rewards reduce intrinsic motivation. In his book Punished by Rewards, Alfie Kohn tells an old joke that illustrates this reality. An elderly man was beset by a group of ten-year-olds who passed his house each afternoon on their way home from school. After listening to their daily insults for weeks, the man came up with a plan. He met them on Monday afternoon to announce that each of them who came on Tuesday to yell at him would receive a dollar. They arrived as soon as school was out on Tuesday and insulted him with even greater enthusiasm than usual. As agreed, he paid each boy a dollar. He promised that he would give a quarter to anyone who came back on Wednesday. True to his word, he paid the hecklers each a quarter on Wednesday, but then announced he would only be able to pay a penny to those who came on Thursday. Loath to perform for a penny what they had been paid a dollar to do, the boys never returned.

Docents come to volunteer at your museum, historic site, zoo, or nature center for a variety of reasons. Their intrinsic motivation may stem from a desire to share their love of a particular discipline with others. They may find joy in simply being with the beautiful or fascinating objects in your collection. They may come at first, and continue to come, for the training your institution offers, a chance for them to learn and grow personally. There is a danger that these strong intrinsic motivators can be extinguished, like the enthusiasm of the youthful hecklers, if extrinsic rewards are offered, contingent on the docents' attendance or performance.

There are other, even more compelling reasons for not including rewards in a docent program. Rewards are designed to be a way to control behavior. Skinner sought to control the behavior of his lab rats; teachers seek to control the task attention of their students. Education directors who attempt to ensure quality performance from volunteer docents by rewarding them run the risk of creating a schism between staff and volunteers. The dispenser of the reward must by necessity also become the judge of behavior. When my reward depends on the good will of another, I will attempt always to present myself in a good light. I will avoid bringing my problems to the very person who might be able to help me solve them. Additionally, when docents come to expect a reward they don't receive, they feel punished.

Rewards do not promote the cooperative, collaborative environment most conducive to quality work. In most cases, rewards are given an artificial scarcity. Only one person will win first prize. Only one docent team will be awarded the Loving Cup at the annual awards luncheon. Not only does this pit one group or individual against another, the awarding of team rewards is further complicated by the dependence of the group on the behavior of individual members.

Rewards change the way people feel about what they do. When docents come to your institution to volunteer their time and expertise, they are already motivated to do so by some internal need that is satisfied by their time there. When you offer them a reward for something they do willingly, they will view their task

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Continuing Education is the Key

Volunteers are drawn to museums in whose subject matter or mission they are interested. For docents this is especially true, since they not only learn while they volunteer, they share their passion for the subject with visitors. The Desert Botanical Garden, which features desert plants from around the world, draws many types of volunteers who all share a common goal: preserving the desert through educating the public, participating in research, and protecting endangered species.

Our location in the Sonoran Desert creates a slow season during the summer months when the temperature ranges from 105 to 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Docents are given this time off and many leave the area completely. The trick is to get them to come back! Continuing education is the key. By participating in new learning opportunities about their passion (the desert) volunteers are constantly rewarded, and each season brings new inspiration.

Continuing education not only offers the volunteers a chance to learn more, it fosters social interaction. Many volunteers thrive on the opportunity to socialize while not working. Leadership opportunities can also arise from continuing education programs. Volunteers can take the responsibility for coordinating these programs, and they can be very successful in recruiting outside speakers. This also provides the opportunities to work closely with one or more staff members. The encouragement that comes from socializing and bonding with peers and staff helps prevent volunteer burnout.

Throughout the year the Garden offers a range of new learning opportunities. Mondays have been set aside as continuing education and meeting days. Volunteers are encouraged to participate in a minimum of three continuing education opportunities each year. The following represent the variety of learning experiences available.

- **Walks with an Expert**
  Once a month a specialist from the Garden staff or the community will explore the Garden while talking about a specific topic. Volunteers sign up ahead of time and the group size is limited to thirty. Topics discussed in the past include: the geology of the Phoenix area, wildflower identification, plants used for dyes, and our cactus collection.

- **Docent Luncheon Lectures**
  The docents hold a pot luck luncheon and host a speaker once every three months. The docent chairperson arranges these with the help of their staff liaison. These lectures are open to any interested volunteer and usually attract between forty and sixty people. Previous topics have included: herbal medicine, bats of Arizona, and story-telling techniques.

- **General Volunteer Meeting**
  The second Monday of every month is reserved for a general volunteer meeting. An educational and entertaining presentation follows a social hour and business meeting. The keynote speaker — a Garden scientist, local university professor, or community representative — speaks about a desert-related topic. These talks range from scientific discussions about paleobotany, anthropology, and ecology to Native American folklore and the history of garden ornamentation.

- **Summer Specials**
  Throughout the summer, Wednesday mornings bring a variety of informal learning sessions. These sessions are geared toward reinforcing Garden interpretive concepts. This summer's sessions will explore: reptiles of Arizona, how to weave mats and coil baskets, desert bees, birds and their nests, and more.

- **Field Trips**
  Periodic trips to other botanical gardens or culturally related museums.
Volunteers are also well received. They provide a wealth of knowledge as well as alternative interpreting and tour leading techniques. 'Behind the Scene' trips are always well attended by our docents and school guides.

Finding people to lead these workshops, tours, and lectures is not as difficult as it may seem. The staff at your institution is a good place to start. The Garden also takes advantage of local university professors and graduate students, Game and Fish Department personnel, garden association members, and staff from other museums and zoos, as well as members of Native American Councils. Most of these local groups are looking for ways to share their expertise and will do so on a voluntary basis. They are good collaborative resources.

Continuing education sessions almost always light a spark in the participants and has contributed to a wonderful working relationship between paid staff and volunteers.

Ruth Capeman has been with the Desert Botanical Garden since 1995. As the Outdoor Education Coordinator, she coordinates programming for elementary through college students and assists in interpretive volunteer training.

Volunteers interested in ethnobotany take part in a saguaro fruit harvesting field trip. Photo: courtesy of Desert Botanical

Do Rewards Defeat Their Purpose?

Continued from page 7.

differently. They may be insulted! If the elderly lady next door has ever offered to pay you for the helpful things you voluntarily do for her — bringing in her groceries, shoveling snow from her walkway, calling to check on her welfare — you probably felt slightly insulted, too. You’re not a good neighbor for pay! There is also the danger that when a docent is offered a reward for a task, she may realize that you think the task is so onerous that no one would do it without a reward!

How, then, do we say “thank you” to the volunteers who make our institutions’ education programs possible? The most effective way to insure that rewards aren’t counterproductive is to make them gifts, with no strings attached. They should be given after the fact, as a surprise, never contingent on certain behavior. The quest for reward, if there must be one, should never be competitive.

Shirley Napier, docent coordinator at the North Carolina Transportation Museum in Spencer, North Carolina, has found a creative way to thank the docents who give tours of that fascinating facility. Each month, she scours flea markets and Dollar stores to find inexpensive “goodies” that are placed, with a little thank you note, in a basket next to the docent sign-in board. A small bag of peanuts, for instance, was attached to a note that read, “We’d go NUTS around here without you! Thanks for all your help.” Another time, a packet of seeds was clipped to a note thanking docents for “sowing the seeds of kindness” at the museum. In July, Shirley found small, star-shaped lapel pins and thanked the volunteers for “filling our days with stars as you shine for the North Carolina Transportation Museum.” “Because we recognize that you are the keys to our success” was the message attached to a key chain.

None of these small gifts represented a large cost; they were not contingent on any behavior; everyone got one; and their awarding was done quietly, without fanfare. Certainly, no one volunteers at this museum solely to receive one of Shirley’s little gifts. The docents’ intrinsic motivations are still intact, and it is intrinsic motivations that keep them coming back year after year.

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor
Why We Stay. Why We Leave.

Museum rewards and incentives don't seem to have much to do with why docents stay and why they leave, if the experiences of The Birmingham Museum of Art over the last 47 years mean anything.

In 1952, The Kress Foundation deeded 29 works to The Birmingham Museum of Art. Two years later, a bequest of Mrs. Helen Jacob Wells made it possible to build the first museum building. Six years ago the building was extensively remodeled and enlarged. It is located between the City Hall, the Court House, and the Civic Center in downtown Birmingham. It has grown into the largest municipal museum in the southeastern United States with Asian, African, American, Contemporary, and Kress galleries.

There are two especially significant decorative arts galleries for the Wedgwood and Hitt collections. Our Wedgwood collection is the largest one of its kind outside of England. The Hitt collection consists of 18th century French paintings and furnishings. There is also a growing glass collection featuring Dale Chihuly's Birmingham Persian Wall and a three-level outdoor sculpture garden.

The Docent Program

Under the supervision of the Curator of Education, the assistant curator directs the docent program of 90 weekday docents, 25 weekend docents, and an annual training class of about 30. There are usually several docents on leave. A docent may be on leave one year without having to go back through a training class. All docents are unpaid volunteers.

The Museum also has about 400 volunteers under the direction of the staff Volunteer Coordinator. Volunteers work in the Museum gift shops, at information desks, and provide valuable assistance in working with special exhibitions. Each year, a Docent Council officer is appointed as the docent liaison with the Volunteer Board to help coordinate our volunteer efforts. A considerable number of docents also work as volunteers in other capacities. Last year, one of our senior docents was also honored as the Volunteer of the Year. A couple of docents are on the Museum Board of Trustees.

The Docent Council consists of 21 officers and committee chairpersons, of whom four are Director Chairpersons. Each Director Chairperson assigns docents for all tours on his or her tour day. The Museum is closed to the public on Mondays when training is conducted in separate sessions for docents and trainees. Weekend Docents are a separate group and they usually do not conduct school groups but have open public tours on Saturdays and Sundays.

Why Do Trainees Leave?

We have had a high level of dropouts, as high as 50%, in the first year training classes even though we ask trainees for a minimum two-year commitment. This loss is attributable to:

1. Recruiting people, or accepting applications from people, who do not have a clear understanding of the work involved. They also may find that they do not have the free time that training and touring require.

2. Trainees with children find that travel and training time are more than the time they allowed for child care.

3. Training has acted as a fascinating introduction to art and a few people resign from our program to continue their formal education.

4. Trainees may like art history and education but some do not like the practical training and leading of tour groups. This includes the required routes and objects on tours that are augmenting school subjects. We have certain grants to provide an educational service. Docents on those tours must be consistent with the school programs.

5. We have had high turnover with curators of education who are the docent trainers. I have admired everyone of these people and each has had valuable abilities and talents but that instability has affected the trainee retention in the past 5 years.

6. Trainees also experience the same problems as senior docents in personal and family health and care giving. There are also the pleasant reasons for leaving such as marriage and relocating.

Why Do Docents Leave?

I have discussed the subject of burnout and resignations with several active, experienced docents. I have not encountered one who experienced burnout or who knew a docent who had. I went back to a docent director of six years ago that worked with 59 docents. I compared the earlier roster with one of five years later when we had grown to 90 weekday docents. Twenty-three from the earlier roster were not active five years later. This means we retained 61% of our docents for five years and had averaged losing a little less than 8% a year.

I called some of these former docents. There was not one dominate reason for their leaving the program. I presume a leading reason was relocation because several telephone
numbers were discontinued or were in use by another person or business.

Several former docents cited personal health problems or health problems that required them to be the primary caregiver. Another group cited job reasons: change of job, increased responsibilities, or the job(s) required more time. The rest were unique reasons, such as an out-of-state second home or a change in children's needs and requirements. Every former docent expressed regret at having to leave the program. Many stated that it was the most rewarding work they had ever done. None blamed dissatisfaction with the Museum, the staff, or touring duties for their resignation.

Two docents did express negative views. One had resigned because she felt a docent council officer was rude and overbearing with her. Another experienced docent was disappointed that, when she had to leave for family health reasons, no one in the docent program ever called her about returning.

Almost all docents had definite ideas about improving our program and the training. The Life Insurance Management and Research Association cites four conditions under which adults best learn or are best trained. These conditions are when there is: motivation to learn; active participation; feedback on progress; materials taught or used in training as it is to be used in work. Nearly all of the docent's suggestions for our program improvements fell within one of these areas.

**Why Do Docents Stay?**

*The People.* By far, the largest reason docents stayed with the program was the people.

"I didn't know any of the other docents when I signed on and now I feel like they are all my friends."

"I don't know of any other organization I could join and meet people with such a variety of interests, talents, and abilities as the ones in the docent program."

"I hate to miss training because I don't want to miss seeing my friends."

*The Museum and the Art.* "I minored in art and this is the closest I come to calling art my profession."

"I was a microbiologist and when I retired I wanted to volunteer in a field in the opposite direction from science."

"We love art and schedule our vacations to visit many museums. When I'm home, docent work allows me to spend more time with art."

"We have a beautiful museum and I have never lived in a city where the city office holders, people in the private sector, individual families, the public at large, and the newspapers supported a cultural attraction as well as they do the BMA in Birmingham."

*The Variety in the Work.* "Our docents are not specialists. Not a month goes by that I don't have a variety of tours: age groups from Kindergarten to Elderhostel, choices from several different types of school-related tours, or walk-in Hi-lite tours at noon."

"My favorite tours are with the visually handicapped. To apply all of the research, training, visual aids, and models ... provided is sheer joy. We open vistas of joy to these folks."

*The Work Itself:* Eyes light up and sometimes tears come when docents start remembering the feedback they received after a tour: the looks, the words, the notes, the body language, or a child's hand slipped into the docent's.

"A football player, who had graduated, took off from work the next year and joined the high school seniors when they visited the BMA."

"A man and his wife wrote separate letters about the excitement they received on a tour."

"I'm a valuable part of the Museum staff, the largest part, the visible part."

"I tell the staff what I would like to see displayed. They listen and try to do it — or, give me good reasons why they can't."

"I'm a docent ambassador speaker for the Museum, and I love to see Rotarians' faces light up when I tell them what's happening and what's coming. 'You don't want to miss this!'"

"I can't wait to get home and tell the family about the surprise I received on a tour."

*Museum Incentives.* All of the above reasons for enjoying their work are incentives to our docents.

Docents never mentioned "museum incentives" as a reason to volunteer or stay. Rewards do show appreciation and make the work even more enjoyable. All docents are members of the museum and members, who are not docents, also receive the first of these:

- Admission to the BMA is free to the public, but the museum charges for some large exhibitions. The docents have free admission to these.

- Docents receive free copies of the catalogues of our permanent collection and catalogues for the special galleries. When catalogues are printed for special exhibits, the docents receive free copies.

- There are two parties each year for docents, and the Education Department pays for the final awards luncheon.

- We take two field trips per year to special exhibitions, such as the Picasso or Five Rings of Art at the High Museum, to collectors' homes, or to artists' studios. (Yes, the docents pay for these trips themselves, but if I were not a docent, I would miss most of these opportunities.)

- Of course, there is a discount at the gift shop and an additional discount if, and while, a docent works in one of the shops before Christmas time.

Continued on page 17.
Recruiting and Retaining Docents

Volunteers have choices about how they will spend their volunteer hours. Museums and other institutions, therefore, must strive to make their programs attractive to prospective docents, as well as rewarding to active docents. While some larger institutions are blessed with well-established docent programs and no shortage of applicants to join their docent corps, smaller institutions often have a tough time finding and keeping docents.

Small museums have small paid staffs, if any at all. Many museums, especially in rural areas, are run entirely by volunteers. The shortage of paid staff time that makes docents so necessary is the very condition that limits staff time for recruiting and training docents. It becomes a vicious cycle: if you don’t invest time recruiting and training docents you end up leading the tours yourself, further reducing the time available for your other staff duties.

Recruiting

The pool of potential volunteers is shrinking. Wives of professionals are likely to have their own careers today, moms are returning to work, and seniors increasingly are becoming caregivers for their grandchildren, or embarking on second or third careers themselves. With traditional sources drying up, museums must be creative in seeking out potential docents.

Possible sources, in no particular order, include university and high school students, Scouting organizations, senior citizens’ groups, professional organizations, civic groups, medical auxiliaries, symphony guilds, museum support groups, and organizations of retired professionals (especially teachers).

Any mailing lists you can get have possibilities of turning up some dedicated new volunteers. Send a mailing to the docents of other institutions as some volunteers are willing to give their time to more than one museum. In Missoula, Montana, one retired teacher volunteers at the historical museum, the art museum, the public library, Meals on Wheels, and reads to blind people, among other volunteer commitments.

Ask your local newcomers’ club or Welcome Wagon organization to include a brochure describing your museum and its volunteer opportunities in the basket of goodies they bring to new residents in your area. Newcomers frequently welcome volunteer work as a chance to make friends in their new community.

Don’t overlook your museum visitors. A rack of pamphlets near the entrance describing volunteer opportunities could bring in new docents. Include a tear-off or mail-in form for those interested in receiving mailings about your docent programs.

Incentives and Benefits

Once volunteers have been recruited, museum staff should try to make new volunteers feel a part of the team. Give them a discounted or complimentary membership to the museum and a free subscription to the museum newsletter. You may want to create an associate membership category, or give limited-term regular memberships free to new volunteers.

Make up official-looking name badges for volunteers. If money is in short supply, blank museum name plates can be personalized with “dymo” labels. Give docents a notebook or binder for their museum handouts and notes, a discount at the museum shop, guest passes for visiting friends and family. These token gifts can go a long way toward making docents feel like a part of the museum family.

Make volunteering easy for your docents. Provide a secure place for coats, purses, and other possessions, and consider giving out parking passes or tokens for parking meters, if applicable. Put the docent schedule or calendar in a convenient place, which has the added benefit of

Design your docent training to be comprehensive, covering not only current exhibitions, collections, and interpretive techniques, but also background material for the general subject area of the museum.
ties for meaningful work, such as independent research in the museum library, collection, or exhibition halls. Museums must remember to recognize the contributions of their volunteers. Thank them often; send each docent a thank-you letter at the conclusion of the touring season. Pass along “fan mail” sent by school groups or other visitors. Feature volunteer profiles in your museum newsletter, and print occasional articles recognizing volunteer efforts. List docent names in the museum’s annual report, perhaps by docent class year or years of service. Present service pins recognizing milestones like two, five, and ten years. Host a volunteer pot luck or recognition picnic. Submit names for local Volunteer of the Year recognitions. Even if they don’t win, it’s nice to know that one’s efforts are appreciated.

Most importantly, make sure your docent program has value to your volunteers by encouraging personal growth. Docents give a lot to their institutions, their institutions should be alert for appropriate ways to give something back to their volunteers.

Training
The initial training course can be a personal enrichment experience for the participants. If your institution’s staff is simply too busy to develop a docent program, consider whether a volunteer docent organizer could be an asset in getting your docent program up and running. Recruit a dedicated and trusted volunteer for this short-term task. Once the initial organizing is done, staff can pick up the day to day operation of the docent program.

Design your docent training to be comprehensive, covering not only current exhibitions, collections, and interpretive techniques, but also background material for the general subject area of the museum. Depending on the scope of the museum, a comprehensive docent training program will require substantial commitment of time; however, the payoff will be well-prepared, confident docents who will have successful and fulfilling teaching experiences.

In exchange for this comprehensive education, docents may be asked to make a time commitment to the museum’s docent program. A sample obligation might be two years, including the duration of the training program. Or perhaps a materials fee could be charged at the beginning of the docent course, applicable to museum membership at the conclusion of the training, or refundable after a specified length of service.

Further Opportunities
Provide continuing education opportunities for your docents, and not just at your own museum. Schedule docent-led tours of other institutions in your region (or beyond). Provide docents with subscriptions to The Docent Educator. Allow docents to take museum course offerings for a discounted fee. Encourage current docents to sit in on selected new docent training sessions for review purposes. Give your docents free access to your museum reference library and video collection. Encourage docent attendance at regional museum conferences. Investigate the possibility of arrangements with local colleges or universities that would allow docents to audit relevant courses or to have reduced tuition fees.

Get your docent group together with docents from other area museums for joint trainings or fun events. For instance, volunteers on Sanibel Island, Florida, participate in a “Cross Training,” in which volunteers who meet and greet the public participate in educational outings to a number of visitor destinations in their area, including a lighthouse, shell museum, wildlife refuge, and historical sites on the island of Captiva and Sanibel. Besides being enjoyable and educational, cross-training provides docents with additional perspectives on other sites that your museum’s out-of-town visitors may want to see.

Being a museum docent can be a very satisfying experience. When docents feel needed, valued, and rewarded for their efforts, they can become an almost permanent part of a museum’s staff. Many docents will outlast museum staff members, providing continuity during times of staff transition. If a museum makes the initial effort to set up a well-thought-out docent program, its volunteers can enable museum staffers to concentrate on other parts of their jobs, rather than leading tours.

Kim Erway Bierke serves as a docent at the Historical Museum at Fort Missoula and the Art Museum of Missoula, in Missoula, Montana. In addition, she is a local Girl Scout Leader. Ms. Bierke received a B.S. in natural resource management/biology and has done graduate work in environmental journalism, ornithology, botany, and environmental education.
Awards that Reward and Build Community

by Ruth A. Slavin

Program elements contributing to docent satisfaction and longevity may run the gamut from the basic (a nametag and a place to hang your coat) to the more sophisticated (excellent training and mentoring) to the more ephemeral (maintaining a collegial and professional relationship between volunteers and staff). Yet all are part of the balanced diet of a successful docent program.

Among the different strategies that keep docent motivation and morale high at the University of North Carolina's Ackland Art Museum are a competitive selection process, thoughtful and substantive training, and on-going mentoring and support. Having docents and staff teach side-by-side, sharing ideas and experiences, also provides shared inspiration and emphasizes a collegial spirit.

Though we function as peers throughout much of the year, staff educators do take time to recognize the volunteer educators on whom our programs depend. Docents and staff alike look forward to the Ackland Art Museum's annual Docent Recognition Breakfast. It not just the delicious, home-cooked breakfast made by the education staff, or the opportunity to look back on another successful year of tours and gallery lessons. It's the awards!

Planning for this informal and often humorous event extends throughout the year. Staff jot down ideas for awards, noting funny events and special contributions. New docents hitting their stride, experienced docents experimenting with new ideas or audiences—all have equal opportunity to receive awards as each year the awards are created anew. (With the exception of a few old favorite categories that tend to reoccur.)

Preparation begins in earnest the week before the breakfast as education staff decide on honorees and spend two days on the floor with construction paper, foam, crayons, glitter, fabric, glue, and paints to create the yearly array of awards. From the "Quick-Change-Artist" award to the "Emergency Exit" award, these home-made creations honor carefully chosen members of the Ackland's 40 person docent corps. Just who will receive what award is a closely-kept secret. An air of expectancy precedes the event, and the turn-out at this annual event, to which all the museum staff is invited, is excellent.

During the breakfast, each award is presented by the education staff member who made it, while a carefully crafted story is told to honor the recipient and entertain the assembled audience. Our goal is to honor individual efforts that represent shared values or achievements. As educators, we know that awards, like praise, should be used thoughtfully to point the way and to open the door to achievement for everyone. We realize the need to strike a balance among different types of contributions and to provide recognition to those who may need encouragement in any given year.

And, finally, we are suckers for presenting awards that come attached to a really funny story.

This recognition event is in keeping with the collegial, non-hierarchical style of the Ackland's docent program and supports our mission to be a "community of learners." As you consider your own institution's needs, you might think about some elements the educators at the Ackland believe have made this such a fun and successful event:

- Significant commitment of staff time and energy — this says to our volunteers "you and what you do matters to us and the institution;"

- Shared, public recognition of common values and contributions — even as we recognize specific individuals; and

- Humor embodied in the themes and stories of the awards, offering a decided contrast to the stereotype of the art museum environment.

Even the best award program will have little effect if the key ingredients of a healthy program are not in place. However, an effective recognition program, one that is pleasurable for both volunteers and staff, is everyone's "just dessert," and can be a great addition to your menu.

At the Ackland Art Museum, staff-made awards are presented with humor and true appreciation for the docents' contributions.

Photo: Jerry Blow, Ackland Art Museum

Until recently, Ruth Slavin was Museum Educator at the Ackland Art Museum of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Ms. Slavin, who now lives in Ann Arbor, MI, is the recipient of the 1998 National Art Education Association Museum Educator of the Year Award for the Southeastern Division.
Planning Educational Outings for Docents

Get Out of Town!

One of the reasons many docents continue to volunteer at museums, historic sites, zoos, gardens, and nature centers is the opportunity such activities offer for personal growth. (And, I'm not talking here about all those "goodies" in the volunteer room!) Many institutions offer continuing college-level classes about their collections and educational techniques for their volunteers, most without cost. Many museums go a step, or a few miles, further by planning "field trips" that take their volunteers to other museums to learn more about content and technique. Such trips are not without risk, but careful planning can ensure quality experiences for both volunteers and paid staff.

Destination

A common destination for docent "tours" is a large city museum offering a "blockbuster" exhibit — a "must see" for anyone with an interest in art, or history, or whatever topic the exhibit is centered on. While these are great trips, and offer opportunities for team-building camaraderie, they may not actually be the best learning experiences. There may be little or no connection between the "blockbuster" and your collections; often the only tours available use some type of audioguide or Docent tour, so docents learn nothing about improving their own tours. Smaller exhibits, or smaller museums that offer collections not available in your area, may do a much better job of supplementing your docents' knowledge about your collection. Other area sites that offer educational programming are also excellent destinations.

Educational outings need not be limited to sites or tours similar to those offered at your institution, however. Since some of the most creative programming may come from thinking "out of the box," tours to institutions with very different collections or programming may be valuable if several productive connections have been thought of in advance. Art museum docents may learn how to manage hands-on activities by watching how they take place at a zoo; science center docents may discover new ways of promoting careful observation on a trip to a historic house. Docents from not-for-profit institutions may learn crowd management tips by touring a local factory.

Timing

The best time to plan docent "field trips" is, of course, when you aren't touring. The main problem is that your destination site may also not be touring then. If this is the case, the education director of the site may be able to arrange a special tour for your group. Try to arrange your visit for a time when your destination isn't so crowded that their staff can't help you. Sometimes, special tours can be arranged for a Monday or whenever the destination institution is ordinarily closed to the public. Be prepared, of course, to offer to reciprocate.

Transportation

Various modes of transportation are possible for docent trips, depending on the destination. For most trips, a chartered bus or chartered van is the best solution. Not only do most bus companies offer liability insurance for the passengers, it is usually safest to leave the driving to a professional. When individual vans or cars are used, drivers should check their insurance policies and state laws concerning driver liability. Bus companies that offer tours as a regular part of their business often can offer less expensive hotel rates when overnight trips are planned.

Sometimes the transportation can be part of the adventure. Vintage railroads, trolleys, streetcars, horse-drawn carriages, and other modes of travel are helpful in recreating an era; often, too, the tour guides for these commercial ventures are great fun (even if they may be more creative than accurate).

Pricing

When deciding on the cost of a docent trip, the actual expenses of transportation, housing, and any admission charges should be included. Additionally, a prorated cost for snacks and morning coffee, advertising costs, and staff time may be included (or absorbed by the museum). If possible, it is best to have participants purchase their own meals as this simplifies your planning. However, arrangements should be made with restaurants ahead of time if a large group will be eating together. It is not fair to expect quality service from a restaurant when they have had no prior warning that 45 people are about to descend upon them! Many chain restaurants (especially those near major highways and tourist destinations) offer free meals to the bus driver and tour leader; be sure to ask.

Accommodations

It is always easiest and less expensive to plan day trips. However, when an overnight stay is required, book double rooms for both safety and reduced expense. Be sure to check to see if luggage service is available and will be included in the quoted cost. It may also be necessary to ensure first floor rooms and rooms with wheelchair access for some of your volunteers.

Continued on next page.
Not Getting Burned

For years museum educators felt neglected, the step-children of their profession. They struggled for recognition within their institution's hierarchy and vied for precious budgetary resources. Education departments and their programs were considered of secondary importance to their institutions and were treated accordingly.

During the past 30 years, many of those perceptions changed. Education moved to the forefront of institutional agendas. Museums, and other such facilities, began to recognize that effective education was their best form of public relations, and that strong educational programming was their most direct route to increased funding, community support, membership, and public awareness.

Pressure on education departments grew. Programming expanded, and each success lead to even greater demand. Unfortunately, the resources devoted to education departments rarely increased in proportion to the workload. Education departments were expected to do more with the same limited staff, and to supplement their personnel needs with volunteers.

The need for volunteer assistance increased dramatically just at a time when the number of people available to volunteer began to decline. Changes in work patterns and demographics, along with increases in the number of women entering and remaining in the work force, lowered the prospective volunteer pool. As museums, historic sites, zoos, gardens, and other such facilities scrambled to recruit more volunteers in order to keep pace with demand and expectations, some grew more likely to accept any "warm body," rather than selectively screening people who were best suited to the type of work and the responsibilities.

Burn-Out Isn't ...

Volunteers who go through an elaborate screening process and who are well informed about the training, time demands, teaching methods, and other facets of being a docent usually screen themselves out if they discover that the time, energy, or activities are not suited to their lifestyle or personality. People who are pressured to join, however, may give it a try in spite of an awkward fit.

Volunteers who are not interested or happy being docents are not victims of burn-out. They just haven't been placed in the proper role or capacity. There are many ways to assist museums and other such facilities; being a docent is only one of many ways to be personally involved.

Those people who wish to be docents must have an interest in, and aptitude for, teaching. Therefore, they must possess the appropriate demeanor and oral communication skills. When the "fit" is a good one, few volunteers leave because they are unhappy or uncomfortable.

Docents who leave because of circumstances beyond their control, such as relocating, job pressures, or child care needs, also are not burning out. There is a natural

Get Out of Town

Continued from previous page.

Emergencies

Many docents are experienced travelers and have learned to be flexible. They can be a great help as you travel, especially if emergencies arise. Whenever possible, two staff members should always accompany a museum-sponsored trip in case one is needed to take care of an injury or other emergency. Basic first aid and CPR training is a real plus for tour guides and staff. And, travel equipment should include a first aid kit, as well as emergency numbers and a list of medications for all participants.

Planning trips of extensive length or distance might best be left to a travel agent. In addition to freeing museum staff for other work, travel agents can often get better prices than individuals can, and they are paid by the vendors, not by you!

There are some risks involved with docent trips, as with most fun things in life. The chance to learn, to grow, and to share with people of like interests, however, far outweighs the potential dangers of leaving our own backyards.

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor
attrition inherent in any form of work, regardless of whether it is accomplished on a voluntary or paid basis.

And, docents who have served in that capacity for many, many years and who wish to find new challenges or tap into new personal resources are not burning out. They are growing, and everyone deserves the opportunity to change.

**Burn-Out Is ...**

Volunteers who enjoy being docents, who teach effectively and who have enthusiasm for the work, may become victims of burn-out. Sometimes, staff rely too much on those who are interested and willing. Placing too many demands on “the good docents” can lead to burn-out.

It is essential that all docents share in the responsibilities and work load of the program. Though all things are rarely equal, too often staff report that they have a large number of docents on their roster, of which only a certain number actually tour on a regular basis. Discrepancies such as this are a recipe for burn-out.

Relying heavily on those who take their responsibilities seriously, and allowing others to get away with far less, is unfair and weakens the integrity of the program. The training, access to staff, and opportunities for professional growth are less meaningful if some people can receive them anyway without doing their fair share of the work.

Certainly, exceptional circumstances do arise in people’s lives, and programmatic flexibility is important. From time-to-time, docents will require a break or a hiatus to manage personal problems or simply to catch their breath. Providing volunteers with a prescribed route for obtaining a leave of absence is important. However, simply allowing some volunteers to do far less for the privilege of being a docent isn’t appropriate, leads to resentment, and places undue pressures on those who are willing to help.

Another cause of burn-out originates in a lack of control. Docents are responsible for guiding visitors through exhibits and, therefore, should be provided with a way to participate in the planning and evaluating of such exhibits. Their experiences and requests should be heard. Docents should also have some control over the objects they choose to focus on (while being responsive to visitor interests) and what age ranges they work with.

When a volunteer leaves “prematurely,” that is when departure is not attributable to fading interest or outside demands, burn-out may be the cause. To prevent a recurrence of such problems, exit interviews for docents are a good idea. Allow volunteers who leave your program to tell you the cause or causes. If you find that volunteers are reluctant to discuss reasons openly, invite them to submit them in writing. Naturally, confidentiality must be guaranteed.

In programs where the work load is shared, where good training is provided, and opportunities for success are maximized, burn-out is a rare occurrence. If, however, docent turnover is more commonplace, then an assessment of the docent program — from recruitment, through training, to responsibilities — is essential. Don’t be surprised if the cause is less that of “burn-out” and more from variables within the staff’s control.

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*Alan Gartenhaus*

*Publishing Editor*

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**Why We Stay. Why We Leave.**

Continued from page 11.

To these incentives, I add our library and our librarians who are so courteously helpful.

A senior docent stated firmly her opinion of Museum Incentives when she said, “My greatest incentive is when the Museum offers exciting education and training programs. I can’t stay away!”

Another senior docent summed up the feeling of most docents on the subject when she said, “I love art and I just love our museum. They’ll have to bomb me to get me out of here!”

---

Bud Johnson is an active docent at the Birmingham Museum of Art in Birmingham, Ala., where he also is the Docent Chairperson. Mr. Johnson also serves on the National Docent Symposium Council.
Facing Change

by Linda Osmundson

Exposure yourself to new challenges. 
Train outside your comfort area. 
Give new tours, work with special exhibitions, conduct outreach programs.

In an art museum, you recognize a docent by her “gray hair, flat shoes, and funky jewelry” stated the chairman of a recent National Docent Symposium. Although not all fit that mold (some are even men) we do have similarities — not the least of which is dedication.

A docent’s dedication is usually to one museum. After many years, that can lead to burn-out. In my case, however, I never had the chance for burn-out. Over a sixteen year period, I served as a docent at the PAM (Phoenix Art Museum), DAM (Denver), SAM (Seattle), Utah Museum of Fine Arts, and the Hearst Gallery/Museum at St. Mary’s College in Moraga, CA. An award for volunteer longevity certainly wasn’t in my future.

A company relocation from Denver to Phoenix started it all. The move left me in unfamiliar surroundings with time on my hands. With my boys in school and my husband at work, my search for a new challenge began. Little did I realize the “can of worms” I opened for myself by volunteering at the Phoenix Art Museum.

As a former teacher/volunteer in Colorado schools, the docent training program seemed right for me. I jumped in with both feet, in spite of learning about PAM’s intense training criteria, which demanded a strong sense of dedication. Requirements included attending weekly classes, reading art history books, taking written tests, and applying learned touring techniques in “sample tours.” On top of this schedule, a program of continuous education, meetings, and minimum volunteer hours awaited after graduation. Nonetheless, I was ready.

Following the eighteen month training, I graduated full of enthusiasm. My “highs” emanated from exposing people of all ages to art via museum tours and outreach presentations. I taught “looking” and “seeing” through participation.

 Barely in the swing of touring, the company transferred us to Salt Lake City just four months later. Head high, shoulders back, and chest puffed with confidence, I gathered my art books and training materials and proceeded to the Utah Museum of Fine Arts.

“You must fulfill our requirements for being a docent,” said the Education Curator, “and pay for the training.”

“Pay to volunteer?” said my husband. “Now I’ve heard it all.” (I was to learn in years to come that many museums charge for in-house classes or require college art history courses.)

Though my ego was a bit deflated, UMFA’s requirements, which were very similar to those I’d already completed at PAM, served to further sharpen my skills and increase my knowledge. While re-training, I presented outreach programs in elementary classrooms. My participatory tours and presentations led to teaching a docent workshop.

Then, after only two years, a third transfer occurred — a joyous return to Denver, but, a new museum for me, the DAM. I complete a required one year self-study program in three months. Four years as a DAM docent concluded with a fourth transfer. This time, we moved to Seattle.

Again, letters of reference, a resume, and all my training materials in hand, I met with the Education Director of SAM.

“You’ll have to complete a special program and sit in on the remainder of docent training classes already in progress…”

What could I say? I trained again. Three years of new touring and outreach experiences, teaching workshops, appearing on a panel at the National Docent Symposium, and making more docent friends ended with a transfer to the San Francisco Bay area.

Commuting distance to museums, anticipating a fifth training program, and the knowledge that we wouldn’t stay long made my decision to forgo being a docent easy. As luck would have it, I discovered a Russian Icon exhibition, familiar ground after giving tours in Seattle for the “Moscow Treasures and Traditions” show. The gallery/museum located on the campus of St. Mary’s College was also on my side, geographically, of the Bay. I made a beeline to the campus.

Imagine my elation when I heard, “Though we don’t have a docent training program, we’d be happy to let you give tours.”

Four years later, our planned return to Colorado consummated in the smaller town of Ft. Collins. Facing time constraints, miles, and the possibility of inclement weather, I turned down the chance to reinstate my docent status at DAM. Instead, I’m writing for magazines, sometimes
about art, and visiting classrooms here and there with hands-on art and slides.

The challenges, people, and teaching opportunities I encountered over the past sixteen years were well worth the additional training I was required to take. Burn-out was never an issue because of constant change. If you remain at one location, you, too, can dampen burn-out with change.

Expose yourself to new challenges. Train outside your comfort area. Give new tours, work with special exhibitions, conduct outreach programs.

Channel your talents in new directions. Teach workshops for your fellow docents, or classroom teachers, or parents. Mentor a less experienced docent. Change your art focus. Learn more about your weakest area, perhaps try concentrating on art from people or places you are unfamiliar with.

If given the chance, would I start again? Yes! Would I fit the docent mold? Again, yes. My hair is gray. I wear flat shoes and, sometimes, even funky jewelry. But, most of all, I remain dedicated to art education.

Linda Osmundson served as a docent in the Phoenix Art Museum, Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Denver Art Museum, Seattle Art Museum, and the Hearst Gallery of St. Mary's College in Moraga, CA.

Ms. Osmundson taught workshops for museum docents and school art docent programs. She served on a panel, "Getting Your Audience Into the Act," at the 1991 National Docent Symposium. Recently, she transferred her interests in art appreciation to freelance writing for adult and children's publications. Ms. Osmundson now lives with her husband in Ft. Collins, CO.

For information on how to order our new, comprehensive training manual for those who teach with institutional collections see the back page of this issue!
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"The Best of The Docent Educator," which presents articles and information from its previous eight years of publishing, is available for just $35 per copy ($39 when mailed to an address outside the United States).

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