



GREATER PHILADELPHIA AREA DOCENT CONSORTIUM

GPADC Winter meeting

The Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History

February 28, 2023

Program:

Monica Gondek, the Chair of the GPADC, welcomed everyone. She thanked all the Steering Committee members that were present and asked us to stand. She introduced about our first speaker: *Dr. Josh Perelman, Chief Curator and Director of Exhibitions and Interpretation at The Weitzman National Museum of Jewish American History.*

Josh oversees the museums exhibitions, education, public programs, and artifacts collection. He holds dual PHD's in Jewish studies and American History from NYU. He has spent over two decades working in museum education and public history. He is passionate about intersecting storytelling and design, and has dedicated himself to present history, culture, and art in meaningful ways. Josh has curated award winning special exhibitions and launched the museums national curriculum. He also served as the chief curator for the landmark Core Exhibition that inaugurated The Weitzman's new building on Philadelphia's Independence Mall.

Dr. Perelman thanked all in attendance, he stated how important docents are to an institution and said how honored he was that we were there. Josh shared that

The Weitzman is the largest institution telling the stories of American Jewish life over the course of 370 years. Visitors come from different ethnic, cultural racial, and religious backgrounds. Josh stated that there were many conversations about how to tell stories in ways that are accessible to anyone coming into the museum. Docent training was a big part of achieving that goal.

There are people who curate exhibitions, create the educational curricula, and who put together tours. But docents are the people with whom visitors interface and derive their experience. The capacity to tell stories, to be engaging, to be funny, and to be emotional is a talent. For the most part, at The Weitzman, all the docents are volunteers. They're also bringing talent to the staff.

Josh remarked that during the pandemic, when a lot of institutions closed, everyone had to learn new skills and new ways to interact without the physical institutions. The docent training in 2020 was by and large unique. In February 2020, a cohort of docents began their training. The challenge was how to train people to be interpreters of material culture in galleries, and films when no one is in the space. Docent training at The Weitzman generally last a year and involves a blended program of subject matter training and skills training. The year involves a lot of practice. Subject matter training requires docents to learn things in the classroom and learning things together. Skills training involves docents being sent out in the field to be mentored by a veteran docent or practice together as a cohort.

Because of the uncertainty of how long the pandemic would last, all subject matter training was pushed to the beginning of the training program. The training program in 2020 lasted two years. Josh remarked, from his perspective, it allowed everyone to be thoughtful and deliberate and to reinvent the training process. Josh was able to ask people who normally wouldn't be a part of the training courses to become expert educators for the docent training virtually. He believes that the longer training program allowed for a real sense of community and

bonding among the docents. However, the skills training was the hardest part of the process. Josh said that he doesn't know if he wants to do a course that is focused on in person inquiry-based learning in a virtual space again. But he acknowledges that he learned a great deal about how to communicate that virtually. The Weitzman created a high-def virtual tour and you could zoom in on an object and see and understand the imperfections which is a fantastic teaching tool. That said, seeing an object on the screen versus standing in front of it, doesn't have the same emotional connection. In May of 2022 docents were brought back slowly, although to this day some are hesitant to return. In closing, Josh talked about how grateful he is for the commitment and tenacity it took for the group of people who stuck with the docent training program.

Josh introduced Rebecca Krasner, Associate Director of Education.

Rebecca spoke about community building among docents. She started working at The Weitzman in September 2022. She expressed that there are two parts to her job. The first part is facilitating school groups and getting them back off the ground. A big part has been going over programs that were beloved before the pandemic and doing them again and learning them again. She stated she felt

privileged to be able to go back over those programs with the docents and refine them. Rebecca shared that the long pause was wonderful for the docents because it gave the museum an opportunity to revisit the programs that they were doing and how to rethink/improve the things that had been done for so long.

The second part of her job was how to create a cohesive docent community. Rebecca remarked that 'she was struck by the community of docents at The Weitzman. They love what they do, and each other.' Examples of some of the things that the docents do to hold on to that community feeling are cooking demonstrations that the museum hosts for docents, docents have a book club that meet monthly, re-training programs for docents, docents also have their own committees that plan field trips. A lot of this is docent driven, docents meet weekly in one of the boardrooms just to talk together and practice together. During the pandemic, there was a series of virtual programs created, led by docents. There are also Zoom coffee meetings monthly, and other continuing educational opportunities. Rebecca said she's honored to work with such a committed and supportive group of people.

A brief question and answer period followed.

A question was posed to Josh about whether he would continue to put all subject matter training to the beginning of docent training. He replied no because he likes the process of learning the subject matter as you're developing the skill.

Rebecca was asked about the how the perspective of the docents changed about school groups? Have school groups expectations changed?

Rebecca said pre-pandemic school groups were large, docents had to take twenty children in a group. Docents felt overwhelmed and felt they could not deliver a quality experience. School group participation is not where it was before the pandemic. The same diversity of schools still come to the museum: a combination of Jewish schools, public schools, and synagogue Hebrew schools. School groups who attend now are divided into smaller groups. Schools respond well to the smaller group size. Although the volume is down, attendance and the quality of experience is just as high, if not higher.

Are schools interested in virtual programming? Yes. Docents need to be prepared to do in person experiences as well as virtual experiences. They have a program called the traveling suitcase which has replicas of artifacts that is in their collection that is shipped out to a school for a virtual experience. There is a fee involved in virtual programming, most of the programming in the Philadelphia area are in-person.

Josh was asked how many docents were in the February 2020 class. There were eleven, the total cohort of docents is forty.

Rebecca answered a question about whether the coffee Zooms for all docents and what happens during that time. Some of it is sharing about the continuing educational opportunities and sometimes there is a particular topic everyone wants to discuss. Other times docents want to share what's happening in their lives with one another. Docents who are not active in the museum participate in the coffee Zooms.

Is there a docent council at the Weitzman. Yes, there is a docent that helps to coordinate it.

There was a question about whether the museum goes through a cleaning process after school groups leave. Josh answered, periodically.

Members were divided into groups and taken on a very informative and engaging tour.

This concluded a very successful program at The Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History.

Respectfully, Velma Jackson, GPADC Recording Secretary