

Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition 2011

The Jurors

Representing CurCom

Brian H. Peterson

*Gerry and Marguerite Lenfest Chief Curator
James A. Michener Art Museum*

Exhibition writers must always be aware that most people need help with stuff like string theory or dopaminergic neurons. An attitude of *generosity* is important. But we also must remain true to the complexity of our subjects—and so the fun begins! Find a graceful, even a *poetic* way of making Mt. Everest seem like a walk in the park, while not losing sight of the actual mountain with its summit soaring above the clouds. That’s our job.

Exhibit writing has very strict parameters. So does a sonnet. So does a haiku. We can’t be Shakespeare or Basho, but we can still be creative despite the fact that we only have 150 words—words that, for example, must put one’s “philosophy” of exhibit writing into a neat little gift-wrapped box. That’s all those taskmasters in Chicago gave me to work with—150 words. Count ‘em, friends—150, on the nose!

Representing EdCom

Cathleen Donnelly

*Senior Exhibit Developer
Children’s Museum of Indianapolis*

I look for labels that intrigue me, that grab my attention and make me want to know more. It’s even better when the copy helps me think about something in a whole new way. Sure, I need text that helps me understand a concept or answers my question, but I don’t want a lecture.

I like short labels that use simple language. If I can’t understand what the writer is talking about, I’ll tune out.

I prefer a label that tells a story, evokes a feeling, or makes me laugh—like a conversation with good friends. But to be an *exceptional* label, it has to pass another test. It must be crafted so carefully that every single word is just the *right* word. That kind of writing looks easy, but is so hard to do.

Representing NAME

Liza Reich Rawson

*Senior Exhibit Developer & Project Manager
Liberty Science Center*

Writing labels is hard. Crafting memorable labels that convey content and concepts, while helping visitors navigate their own experience and meaning-making (using only 50 words) can be daunting.

Before they start writing, the best writers ask, “Who am I writing for? What are they ready to understand? What “voice” will resonate with them? “What are the visitor behaviors we want to support?” Only then do they ask, “What am I writing about?” And, “What are the messages we want visitors to take with them?” This approach results in labels that truly connect to visitors.

I respond to labels that grab my attention with humor or pathos; explain complex ideas without jargon; encourage me to experiment or observe; transport me to another place or time; and inspire me to share what I’ve discovered. These are the labels that stay with me long after I’ve left an exhibition and have changed my own approach to exhibit writing.

Representing the 2010 awardees

Nancy Goodman

Independent Exhibit Developer and Writer

Ideally, an exhibit label is the other half of a conversation. It might provide an answer for a visitor who is curious about an exhibit object and is looking around to find out more. The label “speaks” and answers the visitor’s questions. Labels can start conversations, too, by being so personable that visitors want to read them aloud—sharing ideas and prompting responses from family and friends. Good labels are short enough and long enough to provide engaging, balanced conversations. Good labels nudge visitors to look closer, see more than they’ve seen before, and understand—or keep seeking—just as a good conversation draws you in and makes you think. And good labels, like memorable conversations, are fluid and impressive in their language, whether their content is light-hearted or serious.

Museums rely on exhibition labels to welcome and engage, inform and inspire. Label text must be clear, concise, and captivating—a combination not easily achieved. By showcasing excellent work, this competition aims to inspire label writers and editors to keep striving to find, as Cathleen Donnelly says, “just the *right* word[s].”

Writers and editors from across the country submitted sixty-seven labels to the 2011 competition. A panel of four jurors—representing more than 105 years of collective experience writing, editing, and evaluating museum labels—reviewed the entries and chose eight to honor at the AAM annual meeting in Houston.

Thank you to those who entered their work in 2011. We applaud your efforts. We gratefully acknowledge the work of this year’s jurors: Cathleen Donnelly, Nancy Goodman, Brian H. Peterson, and Liza Reich Rawson. We thank Eileen Wagner of Eileen Wagner Design and Bob Meyer Jr. of M&G Graphics, both in Chicago, for helping create this display. And, we extend our sincere appreciation to CurCom for sponsoring this initiative in cooperation with EdCom and NAME.

Thanks for attending the Marketplace of Ideas. We look forward to receiving your entries for the 2012 competition. Submission details will be available in August at www.curcom.org.

John Russick

*Director of Curatorial Affairs
Chicago History Museum*

Emily H. Nordstrom

*Editor
Chicago History Museum*

Writer: **Toni Wynn**

Editor: **Judy Rand**

Reclaiming Our History
African Burial Ground Visitor Center
New York, New York

Target audience: As a National Park Service National Monument, the exhibition is open and accessible to all. To target our writing, we followed the 2006 Analysis of Potential Audiences (People, Places and Design Research), which identifies audience segments including people of African descent; people who are interested in African American, American, and/or colonial history; women; and older adults.

Label type: Concept (subsection)



Praise from the Jurors

“African men’s lives were cut short, working on the docks.” This is one powerful label. It evokes anger, sadness, even shame. And it’s impossible not to get caught up emotionally in the story. Who can’t be moved by the thought of young men worked to death on the docks?

This writer did a masterful job of selecting just the right words to paint a vivid picture of the enslaved. We see the men “bending under heavy loads,” “their muscles, spines and joints wore out,” while “slaveholders pocketed the wages.”

Though the label is almost 100 words, it didn’t feel long as I read it. A compelling narrative and a skillful use of cadence kept it rolling. Excellent work!

— **Cathleen Donnelly**

Ships Were Laden with Heavy Cargo

African men’s lives were cut short, working on the docks

Enslaved men filled or emptied the ships of sugar, rum, tobacco, and other cargo—goods made by other enslaved people throughout the Americas. Even though the men were hired out, slaveholders pocketed the wages. All day the men loaded and unloaded: bending under heavy loads, carrying barrels, boxes, and crates of goods. They were worked to death; their muscles, spines, and joints wore out while they were still young. Many died in their mid-30s.

Some men cut deals with their slaveholders for time to visit with family and friends. Those who were denied permission might steal away anyway, risking harsh punishment.



This 1797 painting is one of the first to represent African New Yorkers.

Franklin, The Tenth Muse (1797). Collection of the New York Historical Society, 1997.10.



Detail of painting above

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Writer and editor: **Eileen Campbell**

Changing Earth
The Franklin Institute
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Target audience: Eight year olds and up
(labels written at a middle-school reading level)

Label type: Special graphic



Praise from the Jurors

Using only 38 words, this label captures the vast travels of a drop of water (around the world, over time, and from one state of matter to another) and the means of travel (weather and water use by living things), all while using captivating examples and bringing the water back home to the visitor and the museum. Well done!

— **Nancy Goodman**

There’s an art to making an effective list. Variation and surprise go a long way: Peru to dinosaurs to Ben’s bathwater. Rhythm and sonority make a big difference, too: notice how the poem—oops, label—starts and ends with longer, more didactic chunks of words, broken up with short, choppy chunks like “Ben Franklin’s bath.” That’s NOT a sentence, by the way. The horror . . . If Joseph Conrad could get away with it, why not exhibition writers?

— **Brian H. Peterson**

After reading this label I will never look at a glass of water the same way again.

— **Liza Reich Rawson**

Every drop you drink
might once have been
ice in the Arctic.
Rain in Peru.
A drink for a dinosaur.
Ben Franklin’s bath.
The same water is used
over and over again.

So sip, and
join the cycle!

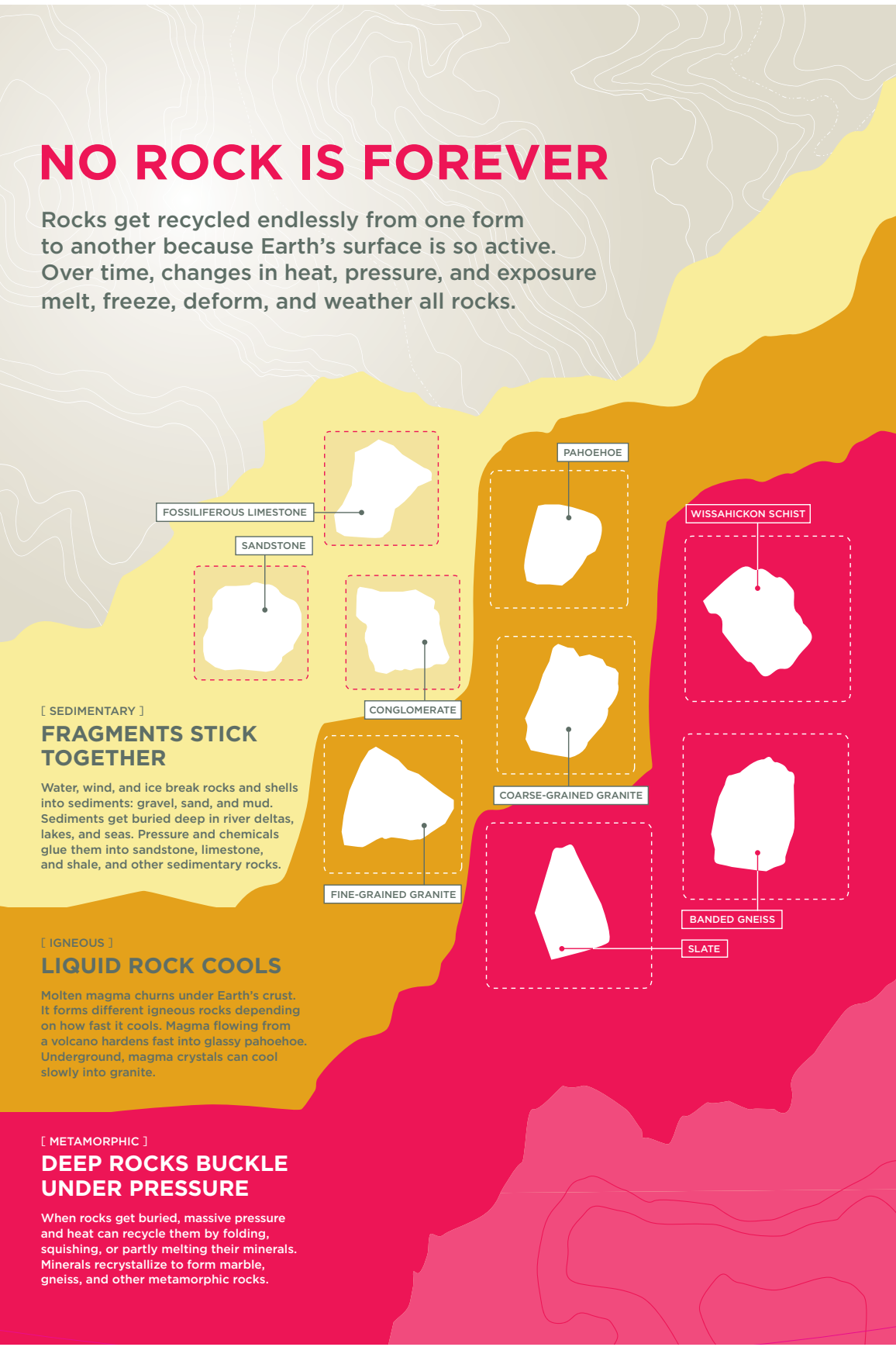
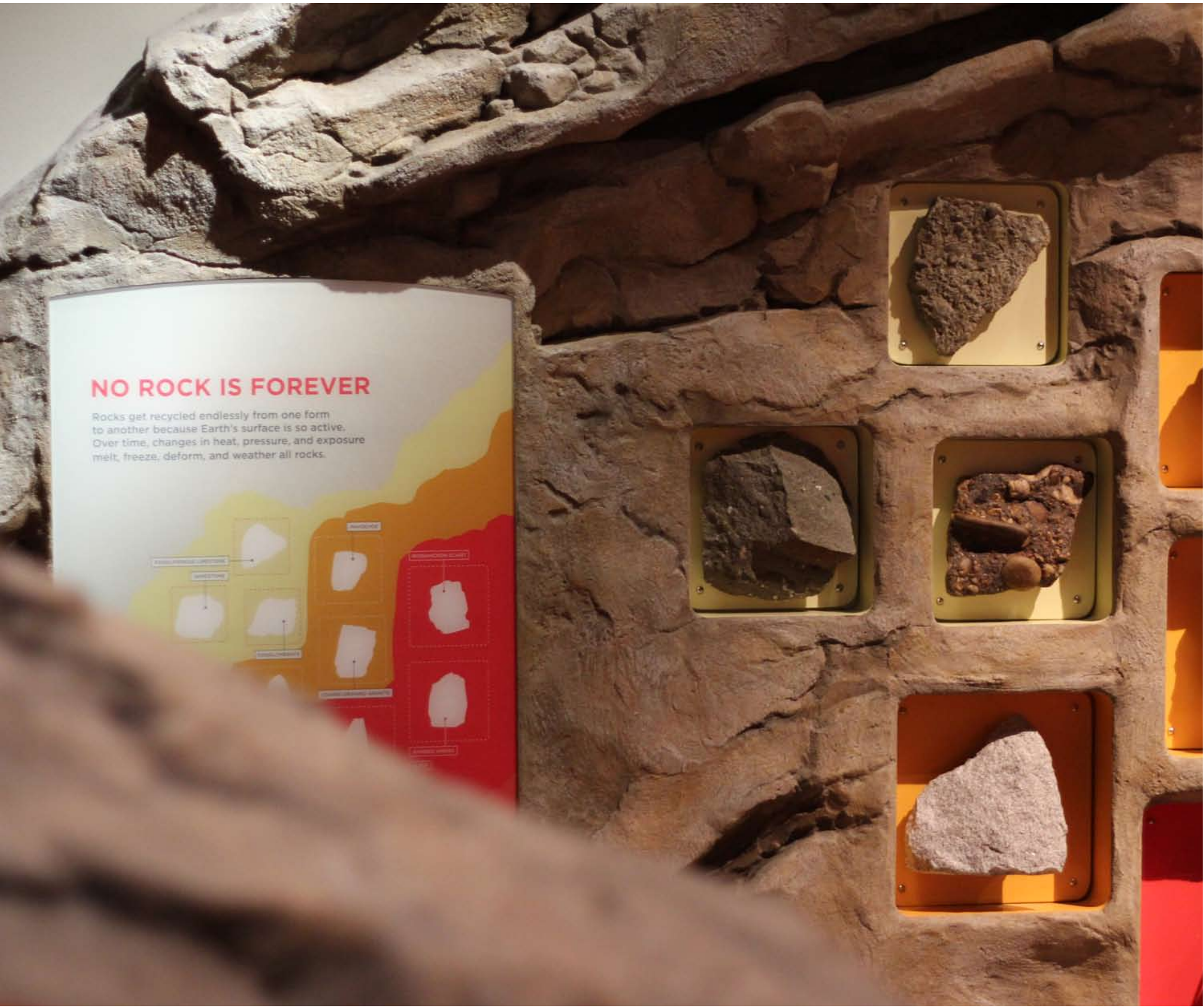
Writer: **Bonnie Wallace**

Editor: **Eileen Campbell**

Changing Earth
The Franklin Institute
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Target audience: Eight year olds and up
(labels written at a middle-school reading level)

Label type: Concept



No rock is forever

Rocks get recycled endlessly from one form to another because Earth’s surface is so active. Over time, changes in heat, pressure, and exposure melt, freeze, deform, and weather all rocks.

[Sedimentary]

Fragments stick together

Water, wind, and ice break rocks and shells into sediments: gravel, sand, and mud. Sediments get buried deep in river deltas, lakes, and seas. Pressure and chemicals glue them into sandstone, limestone and shale, and other sedimentary rocks.

[Igneous]

Liquid rock cools

Molten magma churns under Earth’s crust. It forms different igneous rocks depending on how fast it cools. Magma flowing from a volcano hardens fast into glassy pahoehoe. Underground, magma crystals can cool slowly into granite.

[Metamorphic]

Deep rocks buckle under pressure

When rocks get buried, massive pressure and heat can recycle them by folding, squishing, or partly melting their minerals. Minerals recrystallize to form marble, gneiss, and other metamorphic rocks.

Praise from the Jurors

I love that this label injects activity into something as solid and seemingly unchangeable as a rock. Despite the well-known “diamond is forever” slogan, we learn that “no rock is forever,” what with all that sticking, churning, flowing, hardening, folding, and squishing. Great use of energetic words, clear definitions of the three rock-recycling processes, and solid examples—familiar ones for reinforcement and a lovely new one for fun: pahoehoe!

— **Nancy Goodman**

Writer: **Raúl Nava**

Editors: **Elizabeth Labor** and **Melissa Snyder**

Hot Pink Flamingos: Stories of Hope in a Changing Sea
Monterey Bay Aquarium
Monterey, California

Target audience: Adults and teens

Label type: Object



Praise from the Jurors

This writer sketches a lovely and evocative portrait of a white ibis. Color words—“striking, bright blue eyes” and “lanky pink legs”—draw the visitor’s attention to physical features, while active verbs vividly describe the bird’s behavior.

There’s also a complete story in this label, all in one short paragraph. We see the ibis in the marsh, looking for food, watching for predators. And then the tide comes in and the bird moves on.

Informative and beautifully written, this label is a joy to read and re-read.

— **Cathleen Donnelly**

I love how this label paints a picture with words, “A white ibis scans the marsh with striking, bright blue eyes . . . ” I imagine being the ibis and “Strolling on lanky pink legs” or probing the mud with my “sensitive beak to find hidden snacks.” I can also imagine delight the writer took in crafting this little gem!

— **Liza Reich Rawson**



White ibis
Corocoro blanco
Eudocimus albus

A white ibis scans the marsh with striking, bright blue eyes to find food and watch for predators. Strolling on lanky pink legs, it probes the mud with a sensitive beak to find hidden snacks. As sea levels rise, the marsh will flood and move inland—if there’s room. The ibis will follow, looking for new food and shelter.

diet: fish, crustaceans, insects
size: to 27 in. (68 cm)

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Writer: **Jenny Sayre Ramberg**

Editors: **Elizabeth Labor** and **Melissa Snyder**

Hot Pink Flamingos: Stories of Hope in a Changing Sea

Monterey Bay Aquarium
Monterey, California

Target audience: Adults and teens

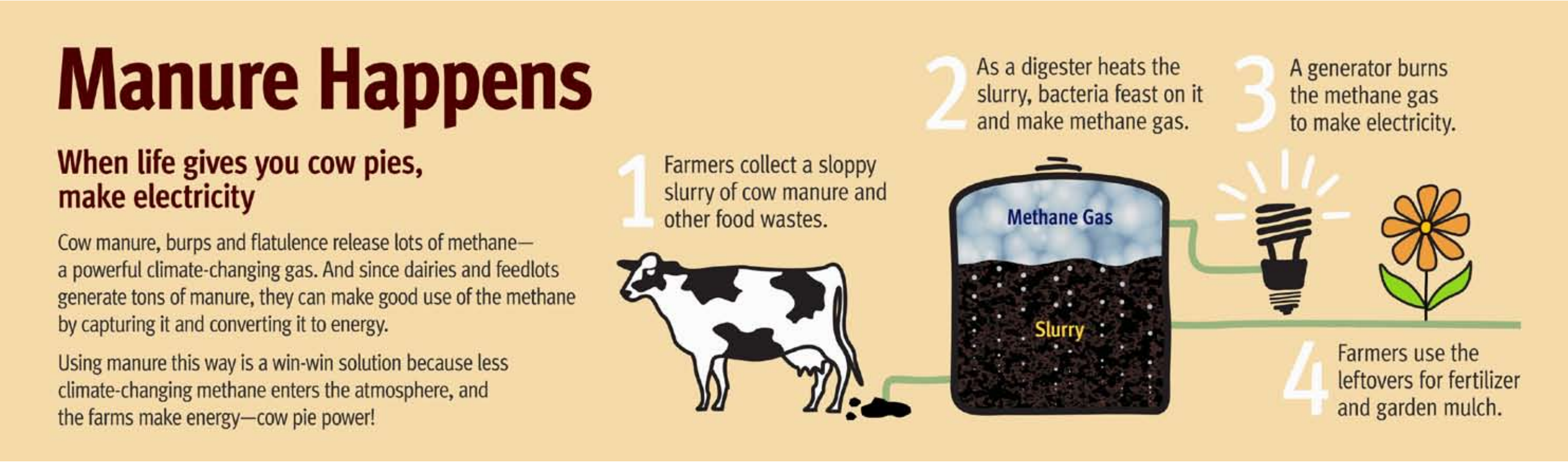
Label type: Concept



Praise from the Jurors

To paraphrase the future wife of Tom Cruise in *Jerry Maguire*: you had me at “manure.” Now that’s an attention grabber: Manure happens. But then the clever doctoring of the terrible old lemon/lemonade bromide, and the grand finale: cow pie power! If your assignment is to write a label about manure and methane, what are your choices? A scholarly tone, with footnotes? Why not have fun with it? That’s what I like about this label—the writer had a good time writing it. Consequently, I have a good time reading it!

— **Brian H. Peterson**



Manure Happens

When life gives you cow pies,
make electricity

Cow manure, burps and flatulence release lots of methane—a powerful climate-changing gas. And since dairies and feedlots generate tons of manure, they can make good use of the methane by capturing it and converting it to energy.

Using manure this way is a win-win solution because less climate-changing methane enters the atmosphere, and the farms make energy—cow pie power!

1. Farmers collect a sloppy slurry of cow manure and other food wastes.
2. As a digester heats the slurry, bacteria feast on it and make methane gas.
3. A generator burns the methane gas to make electricity.
4. Farmers use the leftovers for fertilizer and garden mulch.

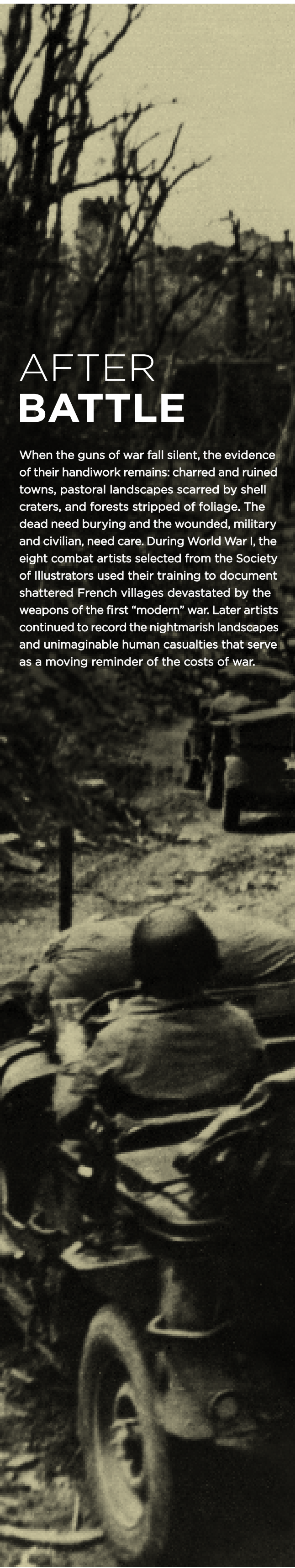
Writers: **Dr. Peter Kindsvatter** and **Sarah Winski**

Editors: **Dr. Steve Frank** and **Mary Jane Taylor**

Art of the American Soldier
National Constitution Center
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Target audience: Students in grades 6 to 12
and general family and adult visitors

Label type: Concept (subsection)



Praise from the Jurors

When you need to find the right words, it helps if you’re feeling what the words need to say. This writer felt the feeling and found the words. The opening line is masterful—it has the rhythm and majesty of Whitman’s war poems. Think of all the banal ways to say it: When the shooting stops . . . After the war is over. Instead—“When the guns of war fall silent.” Silence. Like the men who died are silent. There’s rhythm in those words, and pathos. Thank you to this writer for finding the feeling, having felt it, and finding the words that make me feel, too.

— **Brian H. Peterson**

“When the guns of war fall silent . . .” the haunting imagery that follows this evocative beginning left me shuddering. A well-written label that is poignant and moving.

— **Liza Reich Rawson**

After Battle

When the guns of war fall silent, the evidence of their handiwork remains: charred and ruined towns, pastoral landscapes scarred by shell craters, and forests stripped of foliage. The dead need burying and the wounded, military and civilian, need care. During World War I, the eight combat artists selected from the Society of Illustrators used their training to document shattered French villages devastated by the weapons of the first “modern” war. Later artists continued to record the nightmarish landscapes and unimaginable human casualties that serve as a moving reminder of the costs of war.

Writers: **Eugene Dillenburg** and **John Gordon**

Editor: **Liza Pryor**

Science, Risk and Vaccination
Science Museum of Minnesota
St. Paul, Minnesota

Target audience: Families with children
ages 9 to 13; general

Label type: Introductory

Praise from the Jurors

Good introductions attract attention, launch a conversation, elicit curiosity, or set the mood. This label does all of that. It caught my eye with a simple sentence structure and drew me in with clever metaphors. I'd be curious to explore the topic, based just on what I read in this appealing panel.

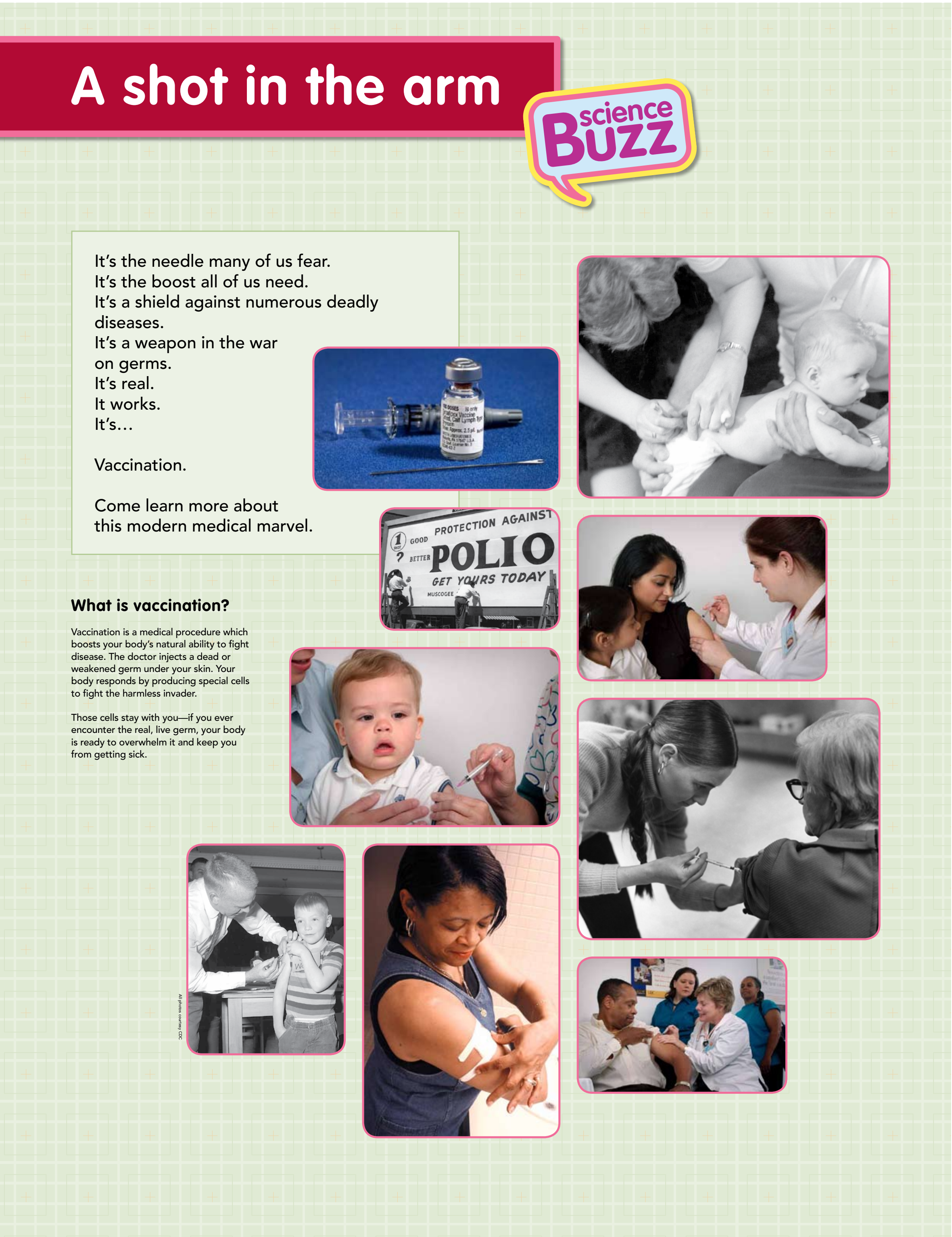
— Cathleen Donnelly

It's literal. It's a metaphor. Perfect title! And then, visitors step through a series of well-chosen words that make their points with good rhythm, alliterative flow, and contrasts (fear/need; shield/weapon; deadly diseases/modern medical marvel) and that acknowledge different viewpoints while strongly promoting one. Every word works. That makes a great label!

— Nancy Goodman

I appreciate labels with a point of view. This writer is clearly in favor of vaccines and lets you know it: "It's a shield against numerous deadly disease." "It's a weapon in the war on germs." "It works." It's a "... modern medical marvel." The repetition of "It's" is used to dramatic affect to build momentum and carry us to the end—and the answer to all the clues—"Vaccination." Nice!

— Liza Reich Rawson



A shot in the arm

It's the needle many of us fear.
It's the boost all of us need.
It's a shield against numerous deadly
diseases.
It's a weapon in the war
on germs.
It's real.
It works.
It's . . .

Vaccination.

Come learn more about
this modern medical marvel.

Writers: Eugene Dillenburg and John Gordon

Editor: Liza Pryor

Science, Risk and Vaccination
Science Museum of Minnesota
St. Paul, Minnesota

Target audience: Families with children
ages 9 to 13; general

Label type: Sidebar

Praise from the Jurors

It takes confidence to break the rules, and man oh man, does this one break the rules! An exhibit writer actually talking about himself, in the third person no less, as if HE’S the thing being studied, instead of a saber-toothed tiger or a squid! And he writes about himself with such style and panache—“This is Gene” and “(Hi Mom!)” Such a friendly, self-deprecatory aroma to the words! But underneath lies a purposefulness, a seriousness that hits home to the reader. This is not theoretical, this is you and me, our lives. A truly masterful piece of work, this label—Best in Show, hands down, from a grateful recipient of a polio shot in the 1950s.

— Brian H. Peterson

What a relief it was to get to this label and meet “Gene.” What a breath of fresh air it must be for visitors, too. Breaking the fourth wall with “Hi Mom!” and adding the touch of self-deprecating humor “. . . much to the annoyance of his co-workers” makes it easier to absorb the label’s core point—that vaccines have risks but the risks outweigh the alternative.

— Liza Reich Rawson

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A case history: Gene

This is Gene.

He works for The Science Museum of Minnesota. In fact, he wrote this exhibit. (Hi Mom!) While doing the research, he came across his old medical records.

In 1965, he was vaccinated for measles—and promptly came down with a mild case as a reaction. He recovered and went on to become a museum professional—much to the annoyance of his co-workers.

Like millions of other people, Gene is living proof that the side effects of vaccination—even when serious—are still infinitely preferable to the debilitating, potentially fatal disease.

SCIENCE, RISK AND VACCINATION

THE SUCCESS OF VACCINES

DANGER!
A case history: Gene

MYTH AND REALITY

FAKES AND FRAUDS

PUBLIC HEALTH AND PERSONAL CHOICE

RECORD OF CHILDHOOD DISEASES

DISEASE	DATE	COMMENTS
BROCHITIS		
*CHICKEN POX	1950	Yes
CHOREA		
CROUP		
*DIPHTHERIA		
*GERMAN MEASLES		
*INFANTILE PARALYSIS		
*MEASLES	1965	Yes
*MUMPS		
PNEUMONIA		
BRISANTIC FEVER		
ROTHOLA		
SCARLET FEVER		
SINUSITIS		
*SWALLOP		
*TONSILITIS		
TUBERCULOSIS		
*WIDOWING COUGH		

medical records

Courtesy Gene Dillenburg

n/a

Gene's vaccine

Courtesy Gene Dillenburg

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