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Nominee Information: Name/Title of the Project being nominated

Returning Citizens Tour Guide Project

What department/positions are involved in the project?

Education and Public Programming Departments Positions: Director of Education and Tour Programs; Senior Vice President, Director of Interpretation; Returning Citizen Tour Guides; Year-Round Tour Guides; Supervisor, Tour Program; Specialist, Education; Vice President, Director of Operations

What year was the program initiated?

Initiated in 2015, launched in 2016

Please explain the program/project.

In an effort to humanize the issues surrounding mass incarceration and foster empathy in visitors, Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site (ESPHS) launched a new tour program that hired recently incarcerated people (Returning Citizens) to give tours of the historic site. Eastern State Penitentiary once stood as the first true penitentiary in the world – built to inspire true regret (or penitence) in its inhabitants through isolation. Today it stands as an abandoned prison and historic site visited annually by over 200,000 people from all around the world. We work to interpret the building's complex history, connect past to present, and raise public awareness about mass incarceration. Most visitors are white middle-class leisure travelers - 70% identify themselves as never having broken the law, been arrested, or known someone who is/has been incarcerated. This audience, while typical for a museum or historic site, is in stark contrast with people incarcerated in the United States, who are mostly poor people of color. The Project expanded how we involve the voices and perspectives of formerly incarcerated people in the interpretation of the historic site, and hired Returning Citizens as paid tour staff. We wanted to foster empathy, humanize mass incarceration, move visitors towards action around these issues, and provide job opportunity for a disenfranchised population. We prepared for a year before tours launched - weighing ethical, legal, and marketing considerations. During this time Lauren wrestled with concerns about how interpreters would straddle the role of being both an educator and revealing deeply personal information to strangers, and handle the emotional stress of this work. She assembled a group of advisors to discuss these concerns and help shape the project. The Returning Citizens Tour Guide Project asked visitors to find empathy and get physically and emotionally close to someone who has been marginalized and vilified by society—"a criminal"—and to see him or her as human. We hoped that the outcome of a visitor's experience would result in a call to action, or a behavior change regarding their relationship to the criminal justice system. Four Returning Citizen Tour Guides provided more than 350 tours over 11 weeks that allowed visitors to hear personal stories of incarceration alongside the

history of a space at the prison. Their tours followed the same structure as other guided experiences, and tour narratives were created utilizing lived experience to break down the stereotypes surrounding incarceration and to push visitors to consider the role and significance of food, art, and religion in prison, as well as questioning the constitutionality of solitary confinement. Craig is a self-taught artist who honed his skills while in prison. He chose to give tours of the Catholic Chaplain's Office due to the connection he felt to Lester Smith, the artist who painted murals in the space while he was incarcerated at Eastern State Penitentiary in the 1950s. Sheri gave tours of Soup Alley, Eastern State Penitentiary's former mess halls. Her tours focused on her experiences working in the kitchen while incarcerated and also spoke with visitors about "chi chi" - food she had cooked using items she purchased in the prison commissary. Josette gave tours of the Synagogue since the space resonated with her experience turning to the guidance of religion while she was incarcerated. As a devout Muslim, she spoke with visitors about the experience of Jewish prisoners at Eastern State Penitentiary and how she related to being a religious minority in prison. Marvin chose to give tours of the Punishment Cells and speak about his own experience living in solitary confinement for fifteen months. This project provided visitors with new perspectives about a stereotyped population, and pushed our organization to change in an effort to best support our mission. A formerly incarcerated project advisor became a board member, and a temporary Returning Citizen Tour Guide became a full-time Seasonal Tour Guide. This transformational experience helps us plan more nuanced public programming and education programs that encourage visitors to see the history and legacy of ESPHS through multiple perspectives, and to think critically about who goes to prison and why. Year-Round Tour Guides were similarly deeply impacted by the program, which strengthened all tour programming. They worked alongside the Returning Citizen Tour Guides, serving as mentors and co-facilitators during the first four weeks of the project. This project pushed them to become better educators who think more critically about incarceration and the legacy of the building they interpret. By working with the local prison reentry community, we were able to replicate the supportive environment of a social services program, while also providing enriching and engaging visitor experiences. Returning Citizen Tour Guides gained experience applying and interviewing for a job, acquired new or enhanced skills in public speaking, provided and received constructive feedback, and were exposed to a field of work they may never have previously considered. All Returning Citizen Tour Guides noted that their experiences participating in the program exceeded their expectations. This project benefited all involved, visitors, staff, and the institution as a whole. Although initially launched as a pilot with grant funding, the project will begin its second year in March 2017 with funds from the historic site's operating budget.

Explain how the nominee has employed new methods or re-purposed existing practices in this program.

Our field typically focuses on telling stories of trauma or difficult and complex issues through museum educators, tour guides, and docents who are generations or decades removed from the topic. However, historic oppression and trauma are still relevant to society today. By engaging trauma-impacted people as more than advisors to the project, but as the actual voices bringing the stories directly to visitors, it can highlight these complex issues while creating more memorable and engaging museum experiences. If our field is genuine about its will to create social change, museum educators are the people who can make it happen. Returning Citizens gave fifteen-minute tours as part of the pre-existing series of brief Hands-on History tours, which take visitors into behind the scenes spaces to gain deeper insight into an aspect of the prison. 87% of surveyed visitors did not know that their tour guide had been incarcerated until they were on the tour. After conducting visitor focus groups and many tense discussions with advisors and staff we ultimately decided not to advertise the program, since it could create a sense of adventure tourism we did not want to cultivate. Returning Citizen Tour Guides disclosed their personal relationship with incarceration in the ways that worked best for them and their tour narrative. For example, Marvin included his personal story in his tour introduction, while Craig waited until he had delivered historic content to bring up his own lived experience. In training, Lauren and the team of Tour Guides discussed what to do if and when a visitor reacted negatively to this reveal, and role-played the scenarios together. Tours utilized visitor-centered techniques such as dialogue-facilitation and open-ended questioning to encourage visitors to reflect and discuss what they think. By telling compelling stories and keeping tours centered on the learner, the Returning Citizen Tour Guides were able to build positive relationships with their visitors and create empathy for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. This is typically work done by social service agencies, policy think tanks, and college professors, but is rarely addressed by a museum. Even rarer is the fact that the program has sustainable characteristics. Lauren forged a path in previously uncharted territory for museum education and interpretation.

How is this innovation both aligned with and offers a new take on museum education best practices?

The project offers a new take on the best practice of excellence in content knowledge, as it values the personal stories of interpreters as much as traditional academic content. Returning Citizen Tour Guides were empowered to develop personal stories that connected with visitors, and complimented historic content. We learned to share authority in a way that resulted in authentic and inclusive visitor experiences.

By placing a marginalized population at the center of programming at a highly visited, broad reaching historic site, we were able to give Returning Citizens an important platform to share their stories to a group of people who typically do not engage in conversations about incarceration. We became a resource in our local reentry community, building and expanding the profile of the historic site.

The project aligns with the best practice of advocating for education as central to the mission of the museum. The impact of the program raised awareness of education programming within ESPHS from the staff to the board of directors, and in the museum field at large. Similarly, Returning Citizen Tour Guides were each invited to further engage with visitors within the historic site's new exhibit, Prisons Today: Questions in the Age of Mass Incarceration by loaning an object that symbolized their incarceration, and by writing a label telling their personal story. This powerful and personal section of the exhibition produces similar empathy and connection for visitors and demonstrates successful collaboration between exhibits and education within a museum.

The project also provided an opportunity for Lauren to gain critical trauma-awareness skills, which were then shared with all Tour Guides. As Returning Citizen Tour Guides were asked to tell personal stories, they needed to consider what their boundaries were for the information they felt comfortable sharing with visitors. This method was found to be so useful for creating positive visitor and staff interactions, that these tools were passed on to all Tour Guides working inside the abandoned prison - a site of trauma, suffering, and confinement - which requires Tour Guides to discuss difficult and sometimes disturbing information with the general public.

Include a description of how this approach helps makes the case for museums as essential institutions.

Not only were we able to raise awareness of a deeply troubling social issue—mass incarceration—outside the venue of a social service or policy organization, but we were also able to have these conversations with an audience that doesn't typically engage in nuanced conversations around criminal justice. The project also created a safe(er) and brave(er) space where formerly incarcerated people could share their lived experiences with people who wouldn't otherwise have these conversations or any interactions with Returning Citizens. Many people have the perception that they have never met someone who has been to prison, yet millions of people are released from American prisons and jails each year. There are limited venues in which open and honest dialogues about this issue occur. Since we chose not to advertise this program to visitors, tour participants found out their Tour Guide's personal

connection to incarceration in real time, and this allowed them to not focus on the stereotypes and stigmas, but rather to connect with their guide as a person. As civil rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson has instructed, in order to end mass incarceration, “proximity is important...get close to the people and communities affected by mass incarceration.” The project facilitated a unique and unprecedented closeness. This demonstrates that museums are essential institutions for addressing pressing societal challenges. Similarly, we provided critical job opportunities and provided in-depth training so that Returning Citizens could effectively share their stories with historic site visitors. All Returning Citizen Tour Guides were hired from Philadelphia, a municipality with the highest-incarceration rate in the country, which results in a large local population of Returning Citizens facing barriers to employment. The four Returning Citizens in this role gained valuable job experiences that helped them move forward. This demonstrates the possibilities for museums to attract people who have diverse lived experiences, including criminal histories, to work in front line positions within education departments.

Include a description of how this approach aligns with one or more of the challenges cited in Center for the Future of Museums' "Building the Future of Education: Museums and the Learning Ecosystem" and/or recent literature about trends in pre-K, adult/senior education/the future of education and learning.

One trend that stood out from the report, which aligns with the approaches used in the Returning Citizens Tour Guide Project points out that museums need to create egalitarian learning environments that challenge norms and acknowledge that “it doesn’t matter what credentials you have - what matters is the knowledge you bring to the table.” By leveraging the stories and presence of Returning Citizens as museum educators, we modeled for our visitors that lived experience is just as valuable as the traditional authoritative voice of the historic site’s interpretation, and that societal norms which keep incarcerated people away from people who are not incarcerated could be shifted to allow these conversations to take place. We used the Returning Citizens Tour Guide Project to be an agent of change for equity in interpretation, and also in equity in job opportunity. The project also addresses the challenge of creating education programming that results in empathy and real-world knowledge in learners. Visitors were immediately affected by their experience, reporting that they walked away from these tours with a more positive impression of formerly incarcerated people and anticipating changes in their future actions related to criminal justice. Similarly, the strategies and pedagogy utilized made the program engaging for its audience, and helped them more deeply connect to the

complex issues surrounding mass incarceration. The project was also collaborative with outside stakeholders who work on the issue of reentry from prison. Project staff assembled four advisors from the Philadelphia reentry community, with expertise in transitional employment, restorative justice, social work, and lived experience in prison. These advisors and other reentry advocates who helped shape the project disseminated information about the project and referred their clients to the job opportunity, and supported the Returning Citizens once they were hired.

Include evaluation plan information that supports the innovation.

We collected seventy-four surveys from participants who took these tours. Questions measured the visitor's change in their opinions of incarceration, anticipated behavior change, and the quality of the tour. Lauren also conducted numerous observations to tweak tours in real time, collected weekly self-reflections from each Returning Citizen Tour, and facilitated team meetings to gather staff feedback, shape the project, and provide further training. To measure the lasting impressions on visitors a follow up survey is planned for survey participants who indicated they would be interested in sharing further thoughts. Visitor surveys will continue in the second year of the project.

Please include any evaluation data you've collected to date. (This could include number of people impacted/served by program; number of hits on a website; number of repeat visitors; anecdotal information; etc - as applicable)

This program impacted 2,000 visitors. Anecdotal accounts from staff observation, comments on visitor surveys, and social media comments demonstrated the power of this encounter for many. Visitors offered hugs to the guides or asked for suggestions about how they could change the prison system and criminal justice policies, or support Returning Citizens.

Survey comments include:

"...gives a first person perspective; adds more life to the space."

"Enjoyed extra dose of perspective."

"Positive to have social interaction with a tour guide to breakdown stereotypes."

"Awesome. Should continue, could be helpful to the formerly incarcerated person to talk about their experience."

Seventy-four visitors were surveyed following their tour to see if the program was meeting its goals. Results showed that about 40% of visitors immediately reported more positive impressions of formerly incarcerated people. More than 70% of visitors planned to change their actions or thoughts about incarceration. This includes actions such as hiring a Returning Citizen, thinking more positively about Returning Citizens, or advocating more for criminal justice issues in their community. Nearly 50% of surveyed visitors responded that their favorite part of the tour was hearing about the guide's lived experience with incarceration, and 97% of visitors would highly recommend the tour they participated in.

How is this program a true model? Explain how the program could be replicated in many museum environments of varying size and type.

We took a risk, and went where few museums have gone. We believe we are the only museum in the United States to hire formerly incarcerated people for a first person interpretive role. This project was not undertaken lightly, as we spent a year conducting research; building an advisory group and partnerships; seeking specific expertise in human resources, legal implications, and museum interpretation; and prototyping Returning Citizen-led tours. We genuinely shared authority, co-creating tours interpreted through the perspective of people who had been incarcerated. Diligent hiring, training, and tour development resulted in an engaging visitor program that honored lived experience with incarceration in an authentic and non-transactional way. This authenticity extended to our reputation in the reentry community at large in Philadelphia.

Similar projects could be replicated in many museum environments and on multiple complex topics. If marginalized communities are engaged authentically and with intention, with lived experiences considered equal to institutional content, similar paid educator positions or volunteer docent cores could be created at other museums. The first step for the museum would be to identify the issue they want to raise awareness around, and then identify a community impacted by the issue; and one which typically has their story told for them. Next, museum staff should embed themselves within this community. The Returning Citizens Tour Guide Project was born and shaped over many breakfasts, lunches, and cups of coffee with people working in the reentry community, just to gather informal thoughts and impressions.

When the museum is ready to hire museum educators or docents from the community, they need to use their connections to get the word out so the community can validate the presence and the intentions of the museum. Ideally the museum would be hiring for paid positions, to be able to offer job opportunities for the disenfranchised population. While the staff is preparing to interview applicants, they should have honest internal conversations with current staff to discuss

the goals of the project and facilitate conversations about staff impressions about the project. This process gets buy-in from current staff and helps them understand the goals of an ethically challenging project.

Once the staff is hired, the museum would need to undertake training sessions that focus on inclusion and sharing authority, while allowing for team building and personal relationships to grow between new and pre-existing staff. A team field trip is a great opportunity for this. Careful consideration must be given to strategies that prevent tokenizing people with lived experience the museum wants to highlight. Instruction in content as well as storytelling must be provided to staff who will be sharing their personal stories with visitors. Rigorous observation and self-reflection assignments from staff need to occur, as well as regular advisor and team meetings. Something like the Returning Citizens Tour Guide Project is not for every museum to take on, but its success can be replicated with the resources of dedicated staff who believe in the goals of the project and in raising the voices of marginalized people. The staff should know that projects like this have the ability to transform organizations and their staff, as well as bring new audiences and communities into the museum.

Nominator Information: Name

Sean Kelley

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May we contact you with further questions?

Yes