

## Were Did the Ideas Come From?

Janet Kamien



What kind organization takes these kinds of chances, on individuals and their passions, on topics, on the pronouncements of funders and of members of their own boards? What was it about this time and place that seemed to make it possible to take these kinds of risk? Certainly the notion that the child visitor was at the center of our endeavors was a part of it. When we believed there was material that children wanted to know about, rather than just ought to know about, we got stubborn. When we believed that there was a group of children who needed something from us—little kids, troubled teens, kids who had a disability—we got committed. We worked to overcome our own internal issues (preschoolers need diapers and places to have snacks, teens at-risk sometimes lift a few dollars from your wallet, wheelchair users need ramps and accessible spaces) and we worked to convince others.

My father was having trouble covering his office expenses during the Depression and was employed one month each summer as the resident doctor at a remote Adirondack resort where he was asked to perform such simple tasks as recording blood pressures and removing an occasional fish hook from a guest's ear.

One of my earliest memories was talking familiarly with a wonderfully approachable older man when I suddenly noticed that resort guest Mr. Lovejoy was missing a finger! A REAL FINGER! I ran from him in horror and avoided being in the same place with him for the rest of that summer. I even asked my parents to bring meals to me at

## INTRODUCTION

Mike Spock

our tiny cottage that also served as my father's dispensary. I was not about to risk catching a glimpse of Mr. Lovejoy's damaged hand on the way to the dining room. Generations later, my father reported that he had been terribly proud when, on the first day of the following summer, he saw me walk straight up to Mr. Lovejoy and shake his hand, missing finger and all. Somehow I had figured out how to cope with my terror and revulsion about his handicap. Paralleling my early childhood preoccupation with amputations, I also remember being completely fascinated by the mummies at both the Museum of Natural History (Andean) and the Metropolitan Museum (Egyptian). I never stopped by those familiar museums without visiting their mummies too.

I have frequently tapped these powerful and useful memories throughout my professional career. I remembered that kids, like me, were always looking for ways to conquer unapproachable ideas and emotions that lurked in our childhood imaginations and nightmares. What was a more important goal than having the museum become a safe place for exploring those scary ideas? Thus, there wasn't even a hint of hesitation that allowed me to get on board to endorse Janet's and Elaine's two exhibits, *What If You Couldn't...?* and *Endings*, and for all the programs and learning materials that anticipated and followed them. They were the experts. From their personal experiences and passions, it was obvious that I should

follow their leads. And besides, in the earliest negotiations between us, Elaine and I agreed that those decisions were hers to make and live with. I had other fish to fry. My job was leading the museum, not deciding which exhibits to endorse.

For many years the collective values we shared among ourselves at the museum could be counted on for making decisions about what was okay and what wasn't. These values were used by managers, board, staff, volunteers, colleagues in picking exhibit and program topics, in deciding whether to collaborate with another organization, funder, or sponsor, in advertising campaigns, and even in the design of logos and the selection of photos. In fact, without putting them into a set of written policies, "it just didn't feel like us" was all we usually needed to explain the reasoning for making our intentions known to ourselves and others. Everyone pretty much understood and was in agreement about why we decided things each way.

But the two controversial exhibitions that Janet Kamien and Anne Butterfield write about in this story tested the resolve of some other stakeholders. For me—at least for me as the director—making these decisions about what exhibits, programs and materials to develop was pretty straightforward. I didn't feel I was on the spot, or subject to any real pressures. In fact, I was surprised that some people thought I was exhibiting courage in making some of these calls. Or maybe I was just naïve, or out of it!

However, I was preoccupied by plenty of other pressures around operating decisions: coming up with a budget we could live with for the coming tough year, whether we could hold onto Museum Wharf when the Museum of Transportation gave up the ghost and the banks and bond holders were about to call in their loans, and dealing with the postpartum depression that swept the staff immediately after the exhausting preparations for the opening downtown. But I didn't lose sleep thinking about whether our decisions, including those about exhibit topics, difficult or otherwise, compromised our organizational values. In those value-heavy issues we usually seemed to be of one mind.

And while I felt I could comfortably navigate the shoals of our collective value systems, I saw specific exhibits and programs like *What If You Couldn't...?* and *Endings* as opportunities to take on and come to grips with tough and primitive emotions, ones I had struggled with on my own as a kid, and therefore made them prime topics and experiences for visiting kids and their caregivers.



A young visitor to the exhibit *What If You Couldn't...?* tries navigating different surfaces and levels in a wheelchair.

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**One thing that bears repeating is that good ideas are cheap. Good ideas that get done well are harder to come by, and always take more time than we think.**

—Signe Hanson

**...whether one believes that children are only aware of the events or situations that parents and teachers tell them about, or whether one believes that children perceive a lot more about what's going on around them than adults have specifically informed them about. If you believe the latter, as I do, you probably also know that in the absence of a way to get at real and complete information about things that are potentially scary or uncomfortable, kids will make things up. The things they make up are often more unsettling and confusing than the truth.**

—Janet Kamien

### A Hothouse of Ideas

Before moving to its current Congress Street location in downtown Boston, The Children's Museum was housed in a series of buildings in the more residential Jamaica Plain neighborhood. Space and often money were in short supply and for museum staff, necessity really was the mother of invention. The father was practice. We did small, cheap exhibits at an astounding rate, reusing old materials and discovering through trial and error what seemed to work for kids and their families and what didn't. We had many mishaps and some plain boring outcomes, but these, too, were useful. Staff grew brave upon realizing that the occasional misstep did not result in personal punishment or in the demise of the institution. The speed and relative cheapness of many endeavors allowed for experimentation and the ethos of the institution supported it.

Ideas for more costly exhibits came from all over the institution, but little of it was driven by purely monetary needs. Each year, administrative staff members made trips to New York and Washington, DC, armed with "walking papers" describing the projects we were interested in funding. In other words, we looked for money



Janet Kamien leads a sign language class for visitors to *What If You Couldn't...?*

to do the projects we were interested in, rather than accepting money for projects others were interested in. This does not mean we were not sometimes opportunistic or that we were rigid. It is only to say that some projects might be carried around, unfunded, for years because we were committed to them.

Such commitments often arose from the passion of a single individual. Jeri Robinson's single-minded attention to

the needs of preschoolers and their caregivers eventually spawned exhibits and programs for this audience not

### Aaron and the Monday Morning Program

Aaron Gurian was Elaine's first born. Tragically, at age seven, he caught chicken pox and developed encephalitis. He survived this devastating illness as few did at the time, but it left him with huge intellectual limitations and chronic seizures. When Elaine began at the museum she naturally wanted Aaron to come for visits. She soon realized that Aaron and kids like him needed to have supervised and serene visits. They could not share the environment with boisterous groups of third graders and get much from it. This understanding spawned a special education program that occurred on Monday mornings (then our closed

day) and tried to provide one-to-one staffing from our interpreters and volunteers. The program eventually became larger, switched to Wednesday morning, and at its height, trained regular education teachers in collaboration with Lesley University. About forty children came each week for twenty years. Hundreds of interpreters, volunteers and teachers met them, learned from them and shared a good time.

Aaron Gurian died in 2011, and all his family and friends came to say good-bye. He never knew what an inspiration he had been, but he was.

only in our own institution, but in children's museums nationwide. Suzanne LeBlanc's nurturing of neighborhood teens (she was a secretary at the museum when she began these efforts) eventually became valued programs for at-risk kids both in Jamaica Plain and downtown on Congress Street with their own national influence.

My passion, shared by my boss, Elaine Heumann Gurian, was special education. We ran a weekly program for special education students in which we matched interpretive staff and volunteers one-to-one with students. Each week during the school year, two groups of twenty kids, whose issues could range from the mildest of learning disabilities to quite limiting physical or developmental disabilities, enjoyed the museum with their hosts for an hour. The staff learned about various special education issues, met a lot of children, and faced some of their own fears and misconceptions about disabilities. Later, the program would train Boston Public School teachers and be taken as a for-credit class at Lesley University.

### The Education of an Exhibit Designer

I had come to the museum very serendipitously. I had recently finished an undergraduate degree in theater as an acting major at Boston University's (BU) School of the Arts. A fine area of study in college, but I found that the last thing on earth I wanted to do upon

graduating was to follow my friends to fourth-floor walk-ups on New York's Lower East Side and spend my days endlessly auditioning. Besides that, I was stone cold broke. Instead, I took a job at the Fernald School, a state institution for people with developmental delays. It was not a school at all, but a vast residential facility. I learned an enormous amount from this experience but it was often more depressing than the by-passed New York fourth floor walk-up. In fact the whole state system was challenged and dismantled a few years later.

In the spring of 1972, as an antidote to my draining Fernald experience, I took a three-month interpreter job (for \$25 a week—not enough to live on even then!) at The Children's Museum while I planned the rest of my life: first I would do summer stock in Minnesota and then in the fall take a costume shop job at Trinity Square Theater in Providence Rhode Island and then begin to audition for acting roles.

But by the summer of 1972, they needed a manager at the museum and they already knew me. Not only was I completing the three-month internship, but I had previously come to "see kids" there on the instruction of a teacher at BU and later, as a stage manager, I had made repeated visits to try to get a kids' show mounted at the museum. So, when I finished the internship, they asked me to stay. I said no, I had plans. Also, I had no earthly idea about how to be an administrator in a museum,



A collection of gear—wheelchairs, crutches, prostheses, a Perkins Braille typewriter—often used by people with disabilities, then known as “handicaps,” was assembled for later use by visitors in the exhibition *What If You Couldn't...?*



Kids needed little encouragement to try out the activities and devices supplied in *What If You Couldn't...?* Nevertheless, most exhibitions were staffed all the time with enthusiastic, trained, college-age interns.

or even why I would want to. Elaine, however, could be very persuasive: “Don’t worry, we’ll teach you.” As it turned out, that was our answer to everything.

### Creating an Exhibit about Disabilities

When the Massachusetts class action suit for “mainstreaming” special education kids into regular classrooms resulted in legislation in 1972 (Chapter 766), I, an administrator with only a little exhibit development experience and absolutely no fund-raising experience, broached the idea of an exhibit about special needs.

This is what I knew from my previous life as a state school employee at the Fernald School: people parted like the Red Sea when I took developmentally delayed residents out for an ice cream in town. Although I totally supported the legislation’s mandate to provide the “least restrictive environment” for kids with special needs, my own experience told me that parents and even teachers of “regular ed” students would, at least at first, have the same instincts. They would be wary, if not downright afraid and they would pass these reactions to their kids. The “special ed” students wouldn’t have a chance. At best, other kids would follow the age-old dictums of don’t stare and don’t ask, leaving the “special” kids more isolated than ever. At worst, they would make them miserable.

Because the museum had done multiple exhibits about hospitals, dentists and doctors before and after I was on staff, I knew that kids were endlessly interested in the gear and in messing about in pretend environments that in the real world might have scared them to death. From working with interpretive staff in the special education program at the museum, I knew that young people had questions about disabilities they’d never felt comfortable asking and that it was mainly fear of the unknown and fear of making a mistake that got in the way of their relationships with students with disabilities.

My simple idea was to create an exhibit in which the facts, the gear and to a certain extent, the experience of disability were put into the hands of the visitors. To my surprise, the museum immediately found a potential funding source, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Aid to Special Exhibitions, and told me to write a proposal. The further surprises were that the proposal was funded, (I had never written one before) and the exhibit was successful (though it won a Bad Taste Award from *Boston Magazine* that year.) Even more surprises were to come later.

The exhibit was called *What if You Couldn’t...? An Exhibit about Special Needs*. It opened in 1974 and ran for about six months. The exhibit took the Chapter 766 legislation’s disability categories and provided two to three opportunities for learning and experimentation for

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each one. These included:

- a way to experience the disability in some fashion;
- a way to experience tools or skills that remediated the effects of the disability; and
- text, written at two levels—one for kids, a basic explanation of the disability, and a second for adults that made some suggestions about courtesy and communication with people who have a disability.

Briefly, the exhibit touched upon visual impairments, hearing impairments, emotional problems, learning disabilities, developmental issues and physical disabilities. Visitors could handle a prosthetic arm or a leg brace, try out a wheelchair, use a Braille, look through some lenses to see what 20/200 or 20/400 vision is like, learn some sign language or try some figure/foreground puzzles. Kids could learn that there is an American Sign Language sign for every letter in the alphabet, or that disabilities aren't "catching." Parents could read that most people who are deaf can lip read, so look directly

at the person you are addressing, speak clearly and don't bother yelling, or that most people who use wheelchairs prefer to be addressed directly as well and basically treated just as you would treat anyone else.

Elaine observed that some adult museum visitors were copying down the label text. (This was easy to notice since she sat at one of the windows in our office that looked directly onto the exhibit.) When she remarked that I might take advantage of this, I was ready to go off to the Xerox machine. What she really had in mind was the publication of a book. Again, a bundle of inexperience, I got the *Writer's Guide* out of the library and was hugely embarrassed when three of the four publishers I had written to called the following week, one chiding me for having approached their competitors as well. We chose Scribner's, and for the next six months I wrote the book on museum time, paid for by the advance. *What If You Couldn't...? A Book about Special Needs* was published in 1979. For the next five years or so, the museum split

## Funding Difficult Exhibit Topics | Anne Butterfield

Kaki Aldrich, the museum's natural history developer, and I were walking along the edge of the canal in Georgetown on a warm Sunday morning in the late 1970s when she told me she wanted to do an exhibition on death and dying. We had been on one of our trips to Washington, DC to talk with program officers at various agencies, and had stayed over a Saturday night in order to save money on the air tickets.

I was shocked. I knew Kaki had battled cancer, and it appeared to be in remission. I admired Kaki as a person and as deeply knowledgeable and devoted naturalist. I had even come to accept the idea that in pursuit of this knowledge, she gathered road kill and boiled them down to the bones in her small summer house in Harvard, Massachusetts (where, ironically, I now live). She did this to let children explore skeletal structures. But the idea of presenting death to children was at best amazing.

Kaki and I talked about it from time to time. We had dinner together on occasion. I become sorta-kind-of-somewhat comfortable with her idea.

After Kaki died of a recurrence of cancer in the early 1980s, many of us at the museum became more and more committed to making her exhibit idea a reality. Janet Kamien took the lead with full support all around. Meetings were held, focus groups conducted, ideas flowed.

Finally, there was a framework and it was up to me to find funding. And that's where the first indication came that this was a bombshell—good or bad.

A preliminary proposal was sent to the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), an agency that

had funded the museum before, sometimes on slightly daring projects. We had a good track record and long-standing personal relationships with several program officers and other staff.

The response was shocking. Our cordial program officer called to tell me just how inappropriate this exhibit was for a children's museum. She wanted to talk about how we could fix the proposal by shifting it to funeral traditions such as the use of Victorian hair wreaths. In other words, make it one—or maybe two—steps removed from the reality of death.

As the conversation continued, she began to talk about a particularly painful death in her family, and soon began to cry—and she was no sissy. She was a wonderful and skilled program officer. She had identified so many of the issues the exhibition was going to address for children and families—and she categorically stated that, as is, the proposal would fail. It was my first insight of what was to come.

The proposal was shared with other people in the children's museum world. The responses had an enormous impact on me. Friends and colleagues called. I listened to sad stories: automobile accidents, orphans, loss of parental support, and so on. Those who called were of one of two minds—do it or don't do it. There was no middle ground. The stories were heartbreaking and each one brought up my own recent losses, especially the painful loss of my own steadfast father.

We decided that this topic was touchy enough that we should send it to the board of trustees. It was summer and they were scattered throughout the globe. At the time, the board and the administration enjoyed

a wonderful and productive working relationship. It was rare that the board tried to intervene in any program, exhibition or activities. They were extraordinarily smart and supportive.

I emailed or mailed copies of the proposal to the board members at their various summer or traveling business locations. The response was astounding! I got calls at home at midnight, at five in the morning, at all hours of the day and night. A beautifully scripted and written letter arrived express from Hong Kong.

Like those of the NEH program officer and the colleagues with whom I'd shared the proposal draft, every single communication had an emphatic opinion based in personal experience. Every phone call, letter, and personal visit was about their most important experience with death. I was awed, respectful and cried a lot.

The "for" and "against" troops formed, but, given the nature of The Children's Museum at the time, it was nothing like a Congressional deadlock. As a tribute to the board and an indicator of the relationship between the board and the senior staff, the go-ahead was given.

We realized through all this that the exhibit was hugely important. The very fact that we were getting such vehement feedback from all quarters told me that dealing with death with our children (and maybe ourselves) was far closer to the surface than most of us want to acknowledge. Our fears often defeat our questions and through this exhibit conversations about things we are afraid of might at least be acknowledged. Death and dying might become a topic of open conversation.

Fundraising went forward. Well, it tried to go forward. NEH still wasn't buying it, and neither were individuals or other institutional givers. We spent inordinate amounts of time trying to fund it. Finally, the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities made a small (large for them) grant of \$25,000 toward the exhibition. They were the only risk-takers.

*Endings* opened on June 28, 1985, the eighth anniversary of my father's death and it was the most brilliant exhibition I've ever seen. It faced the fears and



Natural history teacher Kaki Aldrich used her own terminal cancer diagnosis as inspiration to launch the idea of an exhibit about death for children.

met the needs of visitors, me included. I kept thinking of how much my father would have loved it. I cried, but with happiness. Joan Diver, a smart and devoted trustee, left the exhibition with me, reassuring me that the exhibition and my reaction to it were blessings.

*Endings* opened to more fanfare than was expected—both good and bad, as had been its trajectory all along. Janet Kamien's chapter story reveals the breadth of acceptance and threat. I left

shortly after the opening for a professional development program in California, and despite experience trying to raise money for the exhibit, I, naively, had no idea what would happen in the media. The firestorm of press astounded us, yet despite all their efforts to find fault with the "experts," they couldn't. The museum had, once again, found a core issue and addressed it honestly and thoughtfully for parents and children alike.

But the exhibit continued to trigger challenging incidents. The most heartbreaking was a call from a young mother who had a six-year-old and a four-year-old who was dying of cancer. Was this exhibition something she should bring her children to see? Since her husband worked during the day, and she had no day care, we figured out a way that a neighbor would come with her so that the caller could preview the exhibition and make a decision. "Practicing without a license" kept running through my head, but how could we turn away from facilitating this mother's effort to face—and help her children face—such tragedy?

Then, a trustee called to see if her daughter's nursing class could tour the exhibit. The impact of the exhibit was multiplying.

*Endings* was one of the most important exhibits the museum ever did. It is sad that the fundraising garnered so little support and that the exhibition didn't travel due to circumstances beyond the museum's control. We had learned that families everywhere were actually hungry for a way to approach this difficult topic. But it opened a door and taught me and others the importance of continuing to explore the issues that are an inescapable part of families' lives.



*Endings* highlighted our ways of memorializing those who have died and our different beliefs about death: from left, the Jewish *yahrzeit*, anniversary of the day of death of a loved one; the United States Memorial Day; and the Mexican Day of the Dead observance; at right, a Japanese household altar for *O Bon*, a Buddhist custom to honor the spirit of one's ancestors.

the revenues from sales with me. (There were two printings of about 5,000 each. It's now long out of print.)

Then we became truly opportunistic. The development office wrote grants to travel the exhibit, to create a multi-media loan kit for schools and to expand and improve our Special Education School Group effort to include accredited teacher training. We continually built on our success and I continually built on my passion. Twenty years of cloned exhibits in other museums followed.

Of course, passion is not enough to produce good exhibits and programs. There is research, advice, try-out, design, management and a whole host of other needs. But it's an essential ingredient. This was recognized at The Children's Museum. The rest could be taught or supplied. Passion couldn't. So when it was expressed, the institution had the wisdom to attempt to support it. Sometimes, over years.

#### **Death: the Ultimate Taboo Exhibit Topic for Children**

A few years later, our friend and colleague Kaki Aldrich began a slow and painful descent from a healthy, energetic natural history teacher to cancer victim. Death and regeneration in nature was something she frequently

spoke about with kids. Now, she was preparing her own children for her probable demise. She began to conceive an exhibit idea about death and dying, and because she was so sick, I, with the experience of another "difficult topic," was assigned to work with her in 1977. Kaki did die in 1980, shortly after our move to the Wharf. But we had become committed to the idea, convinced that this was another topic of great interest and importance to kids that nobody talked about. However, exploring the topic of death and dying would not be so serendipitously funded.

In fact, we carried the topic around for more than five years. Many funders expressed initial interest and just as quickly turned away. A federal agency, after reading the preliminary proposal whose submission they had encouraged, refused to review a final: it was "really about death" they said and suggested some less straightforward approaches that didn't interest us. Eventually, in 1981, the Massachusetts Council for the Humanities funded the effort, but the internal disagreements that lived on within the museum echoed the original funder concerns. In a nutshell, many people wanted the exhibit to be less straightforward, less "really about death."

As exhibit developer, I did all the usual things one might do to create an exhibit on any topic. I formed an

advisory committee, found the resources available in the community, interviewed experts—from grief counselors to cemetery managers—read extensively, and as we had done with *What If*, tried out potential exhibit material with visitors. The more I learned, the more I pondered, and the more committed I became to the material and to the idea of the exhibit. My own parents had both died young—within the time period of this exhibit’s inception—so, like a Method actor, I had this experience and the feelings it had engendered to work with as well.

The most compelling thing though, was the fact that when I revealed to even total strangers what I was working on they almost invariably had the following reaction: first, they expressed disbelief (“An exhibit about death in a children’s museum? Is that a good idea?”) and second, they told me a story about death. I didn’t ask, they just told. The stories were sometimes knowing, sometimes questioning, sometimes fretful and complaining, sometimes guilty, sometimes angry. Most indicated an unvarnished need to talk about this thing called death—to seek society about it. The contradictory nature of these exchanges—“You probably shouldn’t talk about this! Hey, let’s talk about this!”—was jarring, but it taught me a lot, especially since many of the stories were from the talkers’ childhoods. They reinforced for me the need for just the kind of set-aside, timeless place for conversation that an exhibit space can provide. It also told me that the exhibit would need to be straightforward, and I completely shed the natural history “web of life” approach that Kaki and I had begun with.

But, I was still missing the “spine” of the exhibit,



Endings included a traditional tombstone, foreground, and a real and open casket.

**Security staff said they would not stay overnight in the building if I put in a coffin. My boss wasn’t crazy about a coffin either: if there had to be one, it would have to be shown closed. (So kids could wonder if there was someone inside?! “Oh, no!” I thought.)**

## Endings Visitors Reveal Thoughts about the Exhibit and about Death

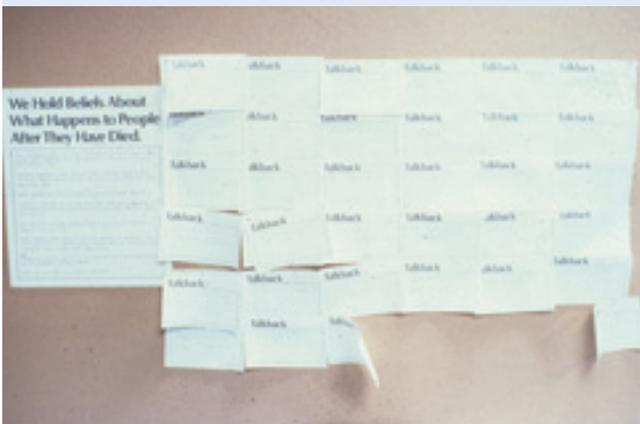
Endings included a Talk Back board on which questions were posed for visitors to answer and post.

### **What do you and your family believe happens to people after they die?**

They turn into a skeleton. • Well I think they go see god and live with him. I don’t know what my family thinks. • I believe they walk up to heaven and get wings. • The soul lives on (I think). • They decay. Jesus comes. They will come back to life. If they have been faithful to him. • When you die you are brought to Riverworld.

### **Tell us what you think of this exhibit. Share your own experiences with death.**

It’s rotten. • I thought it was sad but I thought it was good to talk about death anyway. I’d like to make up a play about death sometime, too. • I don’t like death. It scares me. • Sometimes I want my mother to die. • I think this exhibit teaches people how to handle death if someone in their family dies. Someone in my family died and it was very hard for me because I loved her. • Well done, but kids in preschool wouldn’t understand. • I thought the puppet show was beneficial, especially to me. The woman explained the feelings a person has when a loved one dies very well. It made me cry, and I felt a little angry at my parents. My brother committed suicide when I was 18 (he was 19). When I became saddened with grief, my parents worried and put me in an institution. I had no one to talk to about it and what I felt—unanswered questions....After seeing this film I realize that my feelings were normal. This experience was very educational and made me feel better about death and dying. • I had 2 guinea pigs died. So we got 2 more. So we had 2 of them died. We only have 1 now. The other 3 are buried outside.





In a popular-among-children part of *Endings*, a child touches a dead frog to see what it feels like.

In a 1985 paper “Facts and Conjectures about Visitors’ Responses to *Endings*, Based on Observations, Interviews and Personal Impressions,” author and highly dedicated museum volunteer Deborah Gould summarized her findings about the exhibit, including the following:

- Places with highest concentration of visitors were the video about TV violence, the white mice end of the alive/dead wall, and the frogs.
- Adults spent much more time with cultural-memento case than children. Children mostly focused only when adults called attention to specific items.
- The Talkback Board calling for beliefs about what happens after death... received the most attention of the four boards in the exhibit.
- Adults did a lot of reading to themselves and to children...and seemed to welcome verbal guidelines....Many parents and children drew close together around Alex and Atticus, and When Grandpa Died. Holding hands, hugging, leaning together were frequent and seemed to be responses to recalling some shared experience of loss (or fear of loss).
- Although I did witness one screaming child and angry-flustered adult in the lifecycles area, this scene was not at all typical....Before the exhibit opened, some people anticipated such distressed reactions would be common...but the atmosphere is generally really easy-going.

the organizational method. I began to see what the parts might be that were in some ways throw-backs to other exhibit efforts of gear, experiences and stories. But I could not see a whole, just a bunch of more or less important parts.

Simultaneously, within the museum, all kinds of forces were coalescing against the exhibit, from maintenance staff to board members. As I had dutifully shared various ideas about the exhibit in staff meetings, I now began to get feedback. Maintenance staff were stocking up on the stuff you use to clear up vomit. Security staff said they would not stay overnight in the building if I put in a coffin. My boss wasn’t crazy about a coffin either: if there had to be one, it would have to be shown closed. (So kids could wonder if there was someone inside?! “Oh, no!,” I thought.)

A nationally prominent friend of the museum told me to abandon the idea altogether, and if I insisted on it, to tell a story of loss, grief and regeneration in fairy tale or mythological terms. A board member was just as ada-

mant. After all, the subject could be touched upon just as easily by a bit in the natural history space, the annual celebration of *O bon*, the Japanese Buddhist celebration of ancestors, in the *Japanese House*. There was no reason to dwell on it. Even my advisory group was balky. An idea for a story about a grandparent dying was no good because the grandparents of so many children die, and such a story might upset kids who’d had the experience. (This was, of course, the very reason to do a story about a grandparent dying—not to upset kids, but because it was the experience of so many.) The idea of a truly beautiful time-lapse film of a field mouse decomposing in nature was bad because it reminded one of my religious consultants that, like the mouse, his mother’s body must be decomposing too. Of course there were also exhibit supporters, particularly another board member who spoke up about the appropriateness and need to explore the topic.

By 1982, about eighteen months into development, I had pretty much solved the exhibition’s structural prob-

## Everyone is a Dyslexic at The Children’s Museum

Our most famous dyslexic was Mike himself. Imagine being the son of the noted “baby doctor” and being unable to read! Of course, Mike learned this and many other things that learning disabled kids find hard to master, as did the rest of us similarly affected co-workers. We were legion. Our curator, Joan Lester, Elaine, myself—we were impossible spellers, letter transposers and perfectly capable of writing numerals backwards. The joke was, if you learned better by doing, touching and trying than you did by reading or writing, The Children’s Museum was a great place to work. But our learning quirks sometimes helped us. Many of us were used to arriving at solutions to problems in eccentric ways. Our arsenal of presentation and teaching tools was broad as a result and doing, touching, and trying were always a part of it.



Families line up to get into the new Visitor Center, mid 1970s.

lems by digging into developmental theory around how children conceptualize death at different ages and linking this to specific exhibit experiences and themes. But the rest of the endeavor was absolutely falling apart. If I took everyone's advice or even just that of the exhibit's supporters, there would be no exhibit at all, since each aspect, each film or photo, each object, seemed to make someone terribly uncomfortable.

Then, the unthinkable happened. Mike Spock's son, Peter, died. He and his family went into seclusion. When they came out, Mike and his surviving son, Dan, addressed the staff, told them what had happened, how they were coping and invited conversation. Later, Mike took me aside and told me that the exhibit had taken on a new importance for him, and that I should trust my instincts and come to him for support if I needed it.

Additionally, Dr. Marty Norman, "company shrink," gave me some much needed support. Marty gave all of us, but especially front-line people who dealt with the public all day, regular support through a small on-going consultancy with the Visitor Center. He told

me that I shouldn't worry about people "uncorking" in the exhibit. He underlined this by explaining that it is often his role to try and get people to open up over a loss and that for many, it was tough sledding. He didn't think a person who was in buried pain over the death of a loved one was going to suddenly lose control in a public space. Essentially, his message was, "it should be so easy."

I began to understand something vital. People who had had close experiences with the death of loved ones seemed to make one of two choices. They either pushed the experience—perhaps through pain, perhaps through guilt, or perhaps through the lack of anybody to talk about it with—as far away as possible. They didn't want to be reminded, period. Others sought exploration, ideas, conversation as a way to get through the experience and process it. When coupled with mainstream society's fears and taboos around the subject, it was easy to see why some people wanted so vehemently to push it all away, and also easy to see why others were still waiting for somebody who would listen to their stories. Religious beliefs didn't seem to have much to do with these kinds

**Certainly the times supported us. We were still at a period in the nation's cyclical educational history in which the kind of experimentation we were doing was acceptable and even encouraged in pedagogic circles. Open education theories suggested that the learner, rather than the teacher, could be the leader in the exchange. That children and adults might "make their own meaning," as the contemporary phrase now has it, was something we observed everyday and tried to make the most of.**



Mike Spock and bookkeeper Mary Babine visit the Wharf building in preparation for the museum move. Mary's face says it all.

**Staff who made the trek to see the building arrived enthusiastically and left stunned. It was a dump. A dump in a part of town where you could buy a shot and a beer at 7:00 a.m., but be hard pressed to find a cup of coffee. And it was into this huge, old brick warehouse we were not only going to have to move our lives in a few years, but also magically fill with double the exhibits. Our adolescence was apparently going to be spent shipped off to military school...**

attended to specific concerns, like how to actually display the coffin we'd acquired (standing up, open, and very, very empty), I took Mike and Marty's support to heart and followed my instincts. I looked for artifacts in the collection, the community and from our staff, especially

of choices one way or the other.

In any case, Mike gave me the inspiration, the strength, and let's face it, the clout, to create the exhibit as a whole experience. And Marty gave me the confidence that no one would be unhinged by it.

So, with designer Signe Hanson, I persevered. She tried to find a "look" for the exhibit that was neither too cute nor too dour. She also designed an entryway. In the new building on the Wharf, most of our exhibits unceremoniously began as one entered a building bay. But we had learned in try-outs that the worst mistake we could make with this material was to spring it on visitors with no warning. So, Sing designed an entry that forced visitors to consciously chose to go in and clear signage that told visitors what the space was about (See photo inset on chapter cover page).

Though the worries among some members of the staff and board continued, it was clear that this exhibit really was going to happen, and while I at-

tempted to speak of how we keep mementoes to remember loved ones, or the kinds of things that we bury our loved ones with, a rosary, a bit of Jerusalem earth, ancient Egyptian amulets, etc. In the end, we left nothing out.

### How Did We Get Away with It?

As I look back on all this, the first thing that comes to mind is the unlikelihood that either of these two exhibits on sensitive topics could ever have happened at all. What kind organization takes these kinds of chances, on individuals and their passions, on topics, on the pronouncements of funders and of members of their own boards? What was it about this time and place that

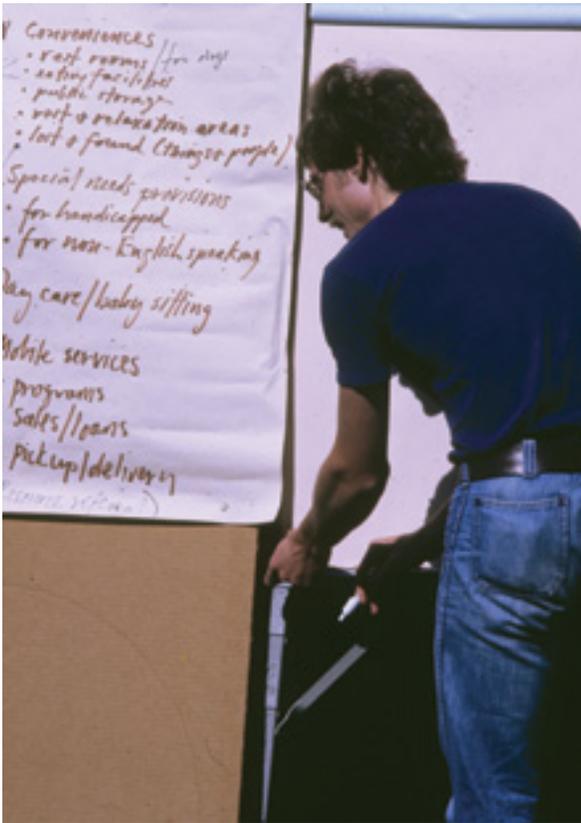


Janet Kamien, Eleanor Chin and Jennifer Tingle play recorders as part of the museum's Out of Tune Band that first assembled in 1985 to play *Happy Birthday* to Elaine Heumann Gurian. The band later expanded to thirty-two members who played *Hail to the Chief* and *Chicago* on everything from cellos to slide whistles at Mike Spock's December 5, 1985, farewell party.

seemed to make it possible to take these kinds of risk?

Certainly the notion that the child visitor was at the center of our endeavors was a part of it. When we believed there was material that children wanted to know about, rather than just ought to know about, we got stubborn. When we believed that there was a group of children who needed something from us—little kids, troubled teens, kids who had a disability—we got committed. We worked to overcome our own internal issues (preschoolers need diapers and places to have snacks, teens at-risk sometimes lift a few dollars from your wallet, wheelchair users need ramps and accessible spaces) and we worked to convince others.

Certainly the notion that we were all learning together played a role. Learners make mistakes and those mistakes deserve forgiveness, not a rap on the knuckles with a ruler. Mistakes could be useful tools that sometimes revealed things that the "right way" would have overlooked. We were also instinctively aware that people



Museum PR staff member Mike Ward reads a clean page to post more notes during a staff retreat's group brainstorming session on visitor needs. Cross-division brainstorming informed decisions throughout the museum. in all departments.

(including us) learned in different ways, long before Howard Gardener's eloquent definitions of "learning styles" was published. We were generally optimistic, generous and forgiving, believing that all the learning boats would rise with the tide—ours, our visitors', even the community's—if we stuck together and did our level best.

Certainly the times supported us. We were still at a period in the nation's cyclical educational history in which the kind of experimentation we were doing was acceptable and even encouraged in pedagogic circles. Open education theories suggested that the learner, rather than the teacher, could be the leader in the exchange. That children and adults might "make their own meaning," as the contemporary phrase now has it, was something we observed everyday and tried to make the most of.

And surely the fact that we were willing to try almost anything we thought kids would like was a part of it. For much of this period we were people who didn't know what couldn't be done, or wasn't "supposed" to be done, so we went ahead with all kinds of things that more sophisticated professionals would probably have been aghast at. In the Visitor Center we even re-designed aspects of our job descriptions every year: "Anybody want to do special events? I'll trade you for vacation

week programs."

But, I continue to come back to the notion of the recognition and support of personal passion. I think this came directly from Mike and Elaine and set the stage for individuals like myself to commit to ideas and take chances. It was as though, when you put us all together, we made not a family, but another living entity entirely. And that this entity had a whole life cycle of growing up and screwing up, getting educated, learning from its experiences and finally expressing itself in all kinds of ways.

### Making Exhibits at The Children's Museum

We lived our childhood phase in Jamaica Plain, a working class part of the city, although the museum's immediate neighborhood between the Pond and Centre Streets was full of middle class homes. We'd been there for many years, housed in a small cluster of buildings that encircled a parking lot. The original museum was located at Pine Bank on a peninsula in Jamaica Pond, but now the museum functioned in two large buildings, former mansions at the suburban edge of Boston, and a small cottage purchased in the mid '30s when the auditorium was built that became the Visitor Center. In the 1970s, the main museum building contained collections, administrative offices, meeting rooms, and the museum's Resource Center of library, educational materials, loan kits and RECYCLE shop. The 1930s auditorium next door had been redone to house the offices and exhibits of the Visitor Center. Design and Production staff worked in another converted house, where we also stored exhibit odds and ends and did an annual haunted house fundraiser. Finally, Ted Faldez, our groundskeeper/security officer/building manager lived with his family in yet another adjacent house.



Jane Torchiana, Signe Hanson and Kathy Bird, the D&P team, at work on graphics and other materials for the *We're Still Here* exhibit before its opening on the Wharf in 1979.

## Letting Go of Ideas: Exhibits We Never Did | Signe Hanson

We could all learn a great deal about exhibit development by looking at the ones we *hoped* to do, held onto in our memory attics, taken out one last time and fluffed up before ruefully putting them aside. There are recurrent reasons why some themes work in exhibit formats and some are better in books or other media, why some have been discarded by one museum for every ten that did them, and why some ought to be done but never will be.

Sometimes we outgrow an idea like a childhood friend, turn fickle and walk home with some other concept. Some ideas stay with us and we stubbornly work them out in pieces of other exhibits, cleverly disguised so that even we may not recognize them: career *leit motifs*.

An idea may not be fundable or graspable or big (or little) enough or suited to our audiences or safe or timely or pushed forward by a true advocate. Staffs are sometimes sleepy, skeptical, fragmented, overworked, in love with their own ideas, not taking risks this year, not suited to this particular idea. The building is too small; the audience is too large, nobody loves the idea but you, the only person who would fund this one is your mother and you're too embarrassed to ask.

Good ideas are cheap; good ideas that get done well are harder to come by—and it always takes more time than we think. Maybe someday we will get around to doing that old one we've been hanging onto. One museum had an "Ideas for Sale" list that gets reviewed twice a year. No idea can be done until a person with real passion for that idea stands up for it.

Below is a representative but not exhaustive list of exhibit ideas from The Children's Museum staff that never got done and some of the reasons staff regretfully gave them up.

### **Exhibits That Never Happened...and their would-be advocates/presenters/detractors/opponents:**

- **Nutrition:** So universal, so basic, so wholesome, so fundable. But if you can't eat the food, where's the fun? Perfect for kit development where you get a teacher and the possibility of cooking and tasting.

—Dorothy Merrill

- **Child Abuse:** Exhibits have served as catalysts for family conversation about serious but touchy subjects (bowels, death, AIDS, disabilities), but could we deal with an exhibit that would help children and their families deal with this subject? Would we be able to provide appropriate staff to back up the exhibit so a curious or needy visitor could take the next step? (Not so far).

—Dorothy Merrill

- **Tree House:** The fantasy: kids building, working pulleys, climbing, peering bravely down from high limbs, swinging their legs from branches, taking a respite in the cozy, hideaway space. The reality: accidents with tools, with props, from falls, from overcrowding. Suddenly

frightened kids unable to climb back down and irritated kids in wheelchairs unable to climb up.

—Dorothy Merrill

- **Feelings:** When parents name a feeling for their child, sometimes they get it wrong and the child gets confused. We wanted to do an exhibit that would help kids reconcile feelings and their names, but we put it on hold because I couldn't figure out how to do most of the feelings other than "competition" and "frustration" and "cooperation."

—Elaine Heumann Gurian

- **Outdoor Climbing Sculpture:** A glass box with platforms to climb through and suspended off the front of the building, allowing children to swarm like ants across that face. But how to keep it warm and clean? The insurance man was still with us, but we never called his bluff. We did one indoors over the central stairwell where the vacation week noise made me wish we had been able to do it outside.

—Signe Hanson

- **Stereotypes:** I have collected and used hundreds of stereotypes of American Indians (cereal boxes, greeting cards, toys) in classroom teaching with everyone from kindergarteners to adult educators. But translating this concept into an exhibit format doesn't work. Putting these images on the wall tends to reinforce rather than eliminate visitors' negative preconceptions. People walk by, recognize an image and say, "Oh yes, I know that one," and walk on without ever reading the labels that dissect and question the images.

—Joan Lester

- **Hopi Pueblo:** Several museum staff went twice to Arizona and New Mexico to explore the idea of a Pueblo Indian environmental exhibit. We chose the Hopi because their culture appeared to be rich, intact and identifiable by our audience as Native American. We visited the mesas, bought Hopi artifacts, talked with Hopi people and fell in love with the area and culture. When we came back, we realized we couldn't do the exhibit. It felt like it would be "exposing" without their approval, and exhibiting the very people who had opened their homes to us. Somewhat later, it also became clear that the Hopi religion, at the every core of Hopi life, was absolutely off limits to us. We had no right to display or interpret sacred objects or private rituals. Instead, we focused on Native Americans in New England and finally created *We're Still Here, Indians of Southern New England, Long Ago and Today*, with an active and ongoing advisory board, which seems to be much more integral to our own institutional personality.

—Joan Lester and Signe Hanson

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In 1978 Janet rests on top of *The Castle*, the first version of the very popular ramped structure in *Playspace*, which was prototyped in a try-out in Jamaica Plain before being installed on Museum Wharf.

Mike continued pursuing potential sites that were more centrally located. Among several options explored, they found only one we could afford, downtown, just across the Fort Point Channel in South Boston, and even then only by collaborating with the Museum of Transportation. Staff who made the trek to see the building arrived enthusiastically and left stunned. It was a dump. A dump in a part of town where you could buy a shot and a beer at 7 a.m., but be hard pressed to find a cup of coffee. And it was into this huge, old brick warehouse we were not only going to have to move our lives in a few years, but also magically fill with double the exhibits. Our adolescence was apparently going to be spent shipped off to military school...

### Developers: Renaissance People

Before our gear-up to move to the Wharf, exhibits were created usually by a single developer, sometimes with an assistant, and a designer who had access to other design and production resources for each exhibit effort. Exhibit projects ran through our Design and Production (D&P) department on a schedule and were overseen for content and pizzazz by Elaine, director of the Visitor Center, and for schedule and budget by Janet, administrator for D&P.

Being a “developer” was simultaneously vague and minutely defined. A developer could and was asked to create almost anything: a school group program, a loan kit, an exhibit, a course for kids or adults or both, a book, an advisory board, a community alliance, a funding proposal, a curriculum, a methodology, a summer camp, an event, or a new program initiative. They were also expected to do direct service, teaching adult courses, school groups, college age interpreters, in-school classes, and work events. Some also had a collections area to attend to, making curatorial decisions and providing expertise in that subject’s content. Even if there was no attendant collection, they were expected to have some kind of content area expertise. At various times developers were also expected to team up with other staff to provide their skills to another person’s project.

Obviously, few people came to the table with all the experience necessary to perform this dizzying array of tasks. I think it’s safe to say that as individuals, none of us ever mastered all of them, but that together, we mentored each other, helped each other and muddled through. So, the “difficult topic” quality of the death exhibit was not the only reason I was paired with Kaki.



Exhibit production staff take a break during the construction of *Playspace*.



A collection of dental hygiene products from the *Toothbrushes Around the World* exhibit of the early '90s, installed in a museum bathroom. This was the third effort at maximizing the inherently attentive audience in this usually under-programmed part of a museum. The first bathroom exhibit, *Music in the Bathrooms*, included sounds from a dog's day and frog choruses from the Smithsonian Folkways Collection. The second, *Who Made This Mess?*, featured scat from various animals. The first two exhibits generated plenty of comments from visitors, but *Toothbrushes* was easier on the eyes (and the ears). We kept them all.

It was also that I had developed some exhibit chops. And Aylette Jenness and Susan Porter became part of the *What If* loan kit team to bring professional writing and curriculum development skills to the project that I certainly did not possess. These kinds of pairings worked, I think, because we not only mostly liked each other, but because the ethos of the place supported the idea that we were all learners, and that whatever skills we had should be shared. And that whatever skills we lacked could—and should—be developed. There was no shame in it, only opportunity.

Funding all these people was where the “minutely defined” emerged. All developers had a “home base” in the Resource Center, the Visitor Center or in, for a time, Community Services. There was some operating budget money in each division, but not nearly enough to deal with all the salaries. Soft money from various funding sources met part of the shortfall. Division managers met to trade percentages of time across departments to try and create viable jobs for people and place the best skills with the appropriate work. So Marion, a natural history teacher in the Visitor Center, might have 30 percent (a

day and a half) to look after her exhibit and train interpreters, and 40 percent for nine months in the Resource Center to teach a Title 1 class in a Boston school and 10 percent in collections to cull the natural history materials under a grant. That being only 80 percent of her time, she'd work—and get paid—for a four-day week that year. When someone with all their time in the operating budget got put on some soft money, that operating budget money was put back into the “bank” to support some other developer's time. It was a maddening, often confusing and sometimes heartbreaking yearly process.

But it also meant that developers got opportunities to take risks, gain new skills and grow the skills they came in with.

#### D&P Staff: Let's DO This Thing!

Design and Production staff were of another stripe. Though when they came on staff they might have never done an exhibit or a loan kit either, all were confident that their base skills of design, carpentry, graphics, etc., were exactly what was needed. They were concrete, prag-

**The idea was that a broker would be assigned to each project to oversee a developer/designer team and report to Elaine as the client. The broker's main job was to make sure that each project went forward and stayed on budget. It was essentially project management, but the choice of the word “broker” also suggested that this person would be adept enough to be a kind of translator between developers and designers who didn't always see eye to eye for various reasons.**

matic workers who wanted to get the job done. This could create a volatile mix with developers.

In my experience this is true in every museum to some extent. Someone once asked me why all production staffs were so damn grumpy. At The Field Museum in Chicago, with more layers of staff, production people accused designers of being slow, wafflely and “airy-fairy.” In The Children’s Museum of old, designers often were the production people. So these accusations went directly to the developers, who sometimes did seem uncertain, slow and changeable. Some developers were just trying to keep up and learn this new part of the business. This often put D&P in a teaching mode, which some people like Sing Hanson enjoyed and took on gracefully, while others disdained it. Other developers had no interest in building yet another set of skills: designers should just understand them and build what they thought they had described. Some developers had no innate capacity for acquiring three-dimensional skills. Still others refused to be rushed—they were working at improving the product by incorporating new D&P points of view and this needed a little time.

In Jamaica Plain, there were many small projects that went through with little to-do, such as changing out the front cases, or doing the dreaded annual “Dentists” exhibit. Sometimes there were outside artists—David Mangurian, author of the book *Lito the Shoeshine Boy*, upon which we based an exhibit, or the Mass College of Art professor who installed a gigantic “undersea” soft sculpture created in one of her classes—whose projects were conceived with little or no input from in-house staff. There were also some projects done almost entirely by D&P staff, like the water exhibits.

In general, projects went according to schedule and budget. I don’t remember us putting anything in late. I do remember one project that was double-spending its budget because the designer and developer each thought they were in charge of its entirety, but this kind of thing was rare. Though things could sometimes have a slightly ad hoc feeling about them, they usually went fairly smoothly, from an administrative point of view.

### Developer vs. D&P: Enter the Broker

The human relationships could be more complicated. I believe that some of this was by personality, but much of it was by role definition. Though the general feeling was that developers were ostensibly in charge of a project—they carried the “vision”—some had little skill or experience in actually creating exhibits or heading up a team, however small.

While these kinds of issues could usually be dealt with on a case-by-case basis when only one exhibit at a time was being worked on, when we looked forward to building multiple exhibits for the Wharf, it was clear that something a bit more regimented would be needed to complete the work, keep to the budget and not drive



The *Fort Point Garage* exhibit was not only designed and built by D&P, it was developed by them, too. It featured the popular climb-in car (bottom), borrowed from *Playspace*, painted red and jazzed up with dials that worked and an inspection read-out component. A meticulously designed Chevy Bel Air model (top) and a tire-changing activity on a green van (middle), added to the exhibit’s appeal to mechanics young and old.

ourselves and each other crazy. This is when the notion of “broker” was created.

I guess it was Elaine who thought this up. The idea was that a broker would be assigned to each project to oversee a developer/designer team and report to Elaine as the client. The broker’s main job was to make sure that each project went forward and stayed on budget. It was essentially project management, but the choice of the word “broker” also suggested that this person would be adept enough to be a kind of translator between develop-



Despite differing perspectives, design and production staff member John Spalvins and developer Bernie Zubrowski collaborated to produce some of the best exhibits the museum ever did including *Bubbles*, *Waves*, *Raceways* and *Salad Dressing Physics*.

ers and designers who didn't always see eye to eye for various reasons. The essential task was to prototype and try out new exhibits and to improve selected old exhibits for installation in the new building. Dottie Merrill and I were appointed by Elaine to be the "brokers."

### The Broker's Challenge(s)

The hardest projects in my brokering portfolio were *Playspace* and any project involving both developer Bernie Zubrowski and designer John Spalvins.

*Playspace*, a toddler exhibit area conceived by Jeri Robinson, was the result of years of Jeri's attempts to get the rest of us to take this age group seriously. While most of us were busy being the site of "the Boston third grade field trip" and planning exhibits and programs accordingly, Jeri was trying to get us to notice that a surprising number of our actual audience was under seven years of age. *Playspace* remains the concrete symbol of Jeri's eventual success at this campaign.

I love and admire Jeri, then and now. But I can say without hesitation that she was the most difficult developer I ever worked with. I think this was because though she can speak German, play clarinet, teach, write, mentor, and remain one of the foremost experts on young children in museums in the nation or possibly the world, she didn't have the visualization skills to translate design drawings into a model she could judge. Inevitably, somewhere between our listening carefully to try and understand what she wanted and the paper renditions of what we thought we had heard, everything went south. The designer, Andy Merriell, and I did everything we could

think of to make the drawings real for her, from marking floors and walls in real dimensions to holding up pieces of cardboard. Jeri would nod and smile. Carpenters would build. Jeri would tell us that it wasn't at all what she needed or wanted and not only that, but the colors were bad. And then she would be angry at us! We finally more or less succeeded in this project by trial (many) and error (many more.) Fortunately, iteration was also a part of how we allowed ourselves and others to learn. By the fifth or sixth iteration—over years—Jeri more or less got the space she wanted.

### John and Bernie

John and Bernie were another kettle of fish and it was here that one could see the basic assumptions we lived on at their most frayed.

Out of all of us, Bernie should have been the easiest developer to work with on an exhibit. A scientist, an artist, and a truly gifted teacher and observer who really knows kids, his head was always bursting with interesting ideas about how to create an experimental base for visitors, how to make phenomenon "real" and to notice the connections that could be made between art and science, the natural world and the made world. His favored materials were cheap and simple and his solutions often mechanical. He is the man that made blowing bubbles a staple of children's museums everywhere, and hardly the sort of "airy-fairy" developer that could drive pragmatic D&Pers to distraction.

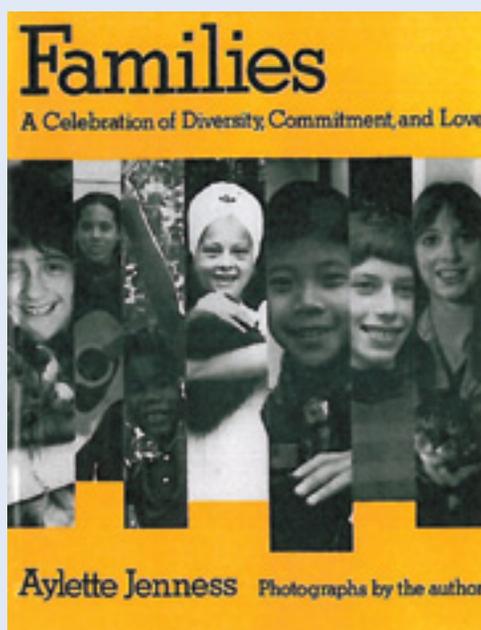
John is literally an aerodynamic engineer. He can design and make anything—even an airplane! He could

**There is so much more to tell, to think about, to glean from those years. There is a reason so many of us—some having only served as interpreters for a three-month stint—continued to do museum work and even went on to become important figures in the field. We were all a part of a kind of experiment. Yes, we were happy when we had good attendance numbers, or got the next piece of funding, balanced the budget, got a project completed or, got a compliment from our peers. But what I remember as the real joy of the place was someone bursting into the office to say, "You'll never guess what I saw on the floor today!"**

## Families: A Celebration of Diversity, Commitment, and Love | Aylette Jenness

I want to speak a little bit about a photographic exhibit, *Families*. But I'd like to begin by talking about how we did exhibits—sometimes, not always—with endless staff meetings in which we'd sit around and talk about what it was kids needed to know in the world today. And what a wonderful way to proceed on an exhibit, as opposed to a television show that then becomes an exhibit. In the late '70s, early '80s we talked about families. At that time the popular image was the nuclear family—Mom, Dad, Dick and Jane, and Spot and Puff, or whatever the cat's name was. And in fact that wasn't how most families were. So we began to think about how could we address this subject. Just among ourselves and the people we knew, there were people of color and of different religious backgrounds—all sorts of families. So we did an exhibit in 1985 that was mainly photographs.

It was later copied and circulated in various places in the United States. The diversity of families was terrific. I think it was one of the first places where a lesbian family showed up, and I sort of held my breath to see whether there were going to be objections to that.



There weren't any in Boston. Interestingly enough, the only place that there was, was in Seattle, for some reason where the exhibit was picketed by a religious group. Seattle of all places. What a surprise. But in Boston, no. Not at all.

The exhibit was set up like a living room. It had a sofa, chairs, lamps, a rug on the floor. And these photographs on the wall. There were some children's books on the table for kids to read. And papers and crayons that kids could use to create drawings of their own families. Each blank sheet was titled, "My Family." We put the drawings up on bulletin boards. We got tons of them. We changed them all the time, there were so many. So we did a book from the exhibit.

When I did the book, I added some other families. I needed a gay family, and I wanted a bigger geographical spread than the Boston area, so we found families, in other places. In the book we included some of the blank "My Family" pages. So there was a transfer from audience participation in an exhibit to audience participation in a book.

—Excerpted from an interview with Mike Spock, 2011

understand, in ways that many of the rest of us could not, the basis of the phenomena Bernie's work explored.

But, somehow these two could never really see eye-to-eye. Meetings were often grim affairs, edged with distrust. John seemed to feel that few of Bernie's ideas would actually work, even if they could be practically made. Bernie seemed to feel that John wasn't truly grasping his ideas. It would be easy to say that "they were too much alike" or that they were being competitive with each other in some cliché macho way. But neither of these would be the truth. I think now, looking back over all these years, that Bernie's disdain for exhibits as a medium was seen by John, an ace exhibit-maker, as profoundly insulting.

I understand Bernie's point of view. Exhibits are an imperfect medium. They do not honor the "present tense" of the user's access needs or interest. For Bernie, the perfect medium was the afterschool program in which simple materials could be informally introduced by Bernie himself to create immediate experiences for kids that could be manipulated in the moment to take a child's interest or new idea to another level. Exhibits can't do that. They are not "wise mentors." They do not notice a "teachable moment" and adjust themselves to take advantage of it. Their value lies elsewhere, in the land of beginnings.

On the other hand, we were doing exhibits. And we were doing them as well as could be expected within



A sighted visitor wearing a blindfold makes her way through a roomful of textured surfaces in the “Blind Walk” in *What If You Couldn’t...?*

Exhibit text included the following passage:

Because people who are blind often get around very well and have other skills that seem impossible without vision, sighted people may think they have “super” hearing or “super” sense of touch. This is probably because sighted people do not use or train their other senses as well as the person without sight must.

Children sometimes play at being “blind.” We have provided a small area for experimentation. It is important to remember that:

- the eerie “blackness” experienced by blindfolded sighted people is not what a blind person experiences;
- being blindfolded for a short time does not really tell you what it is like to be blind.

the limits of the form, our experience, and our space and budget considerations. We were pushing the form mechanically, emotionally, and pedagogically to yield sometimes surprising results. And John and his staff were the people who were making this possible.

#### Through Thick and Thin, What Made It Work?

In the end there was nothing to do about it but persevere—which is exactly what we did. Out of ongoing clashes, came some wonderful exhibits, in spite of the tensions. *Bubbles, Waves, Simple Machines, Tops, Salad Dressing Physics, Raceways*, and probably some others I don’t remember.

This taught me two important things:

- We didn’t all have to get along in order to produce good stuff, although it was certainly preferable.
- Our basic agreement—that we were all in this together and that it was all for the visitor—really was our life line. Even when it frayed, it hardly ever snapped.

This basic agreement saw us through an immense amount of *sturm und drang*. It created the basis for good work among people who sometimes didn’t get along or in a few cases, even like each other. For others, the intensity of our belief in the institution and the work we did in it served as the basis for deep and lasting life-long friendships that continue among us to this day, though most of us no longer work there.

There is so much more to tell, to think about, to glean from those years. There is a reason so many of us—some having only served as interpreters for a three-month stint—continued to do museum work and even went on to become important figures in the field. We were all a part of a kind of experiment. Yes, we were happy when we had good attendance numbers, or got the next piece of funding, balanced the budget, got a project completed, or got a compliment from our peers. But what I remember as the real joy of the place was someone bursting into the office to say, “You’ll never guess what I saw on the floor today!”

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