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Hands-on experience

Network connects Arkansas museums interactively with more of the state's kids

BY MICHELLE PARKS
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FAYETTEVILLE — A new statewide museum collaborative in Arkansas focuses on making hands-on, interactive exhibits more accessible to the state's half-million schoolchildren.

The Arkansas Discovery Network connects seven sites around the state.

A grant of more than $7.3 million from the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation is funding this project over five years.

Network coordinator Diane LaFollette wasn't in on the beginning stages of the project. But she knows that several museums had sought funding for capital projects from the Las Vegas-based Reynolds Foundation. Those inquiries got the foundation thinking about museums.

The foundation researched the possibility of a museum network in three states - Arkansas, Nevada and Oklahoma. They wanted the program to reach children who don't typically get museum experiences, LaFollette says. And they wanted to make sure the program encompassed the entire state.

Many museum networks in the country connect larger cities in several states and are usually with major institutions, LaFollette says. She believes this is the first network within a single state to encompass small museums.

The sites involved are the University of Arkansas Center for Mathematics and Science Education in Fayetteville; the Museum of Discovery in Little Rock; the Mid-America Science Museum in Hot Springs; the Arts and Science Center for Southeast Arkansas in Pine Bluff; the Texarkana Museums System; the Arkansas Museum of Natural Resources in Smackover; and the Arkansas State University Museum in Jonesboro.

"These museums have great community ties," LaFollette says. "The network is here to help build up their resources so they can better serve their communities." As part of the network, several exhibits will travel to these sites over the five-year period.

The first traveling exhibit, "Grossology: The (Impolite) Science of the Human Body," started in LittleRock last fall. It stopped in Fayetteville from January to April, then went to Pine Bluff, where it will stay through Aug. 26.

The purpose of this network is "to get exhibits like these to places that normally wouldn't get them," LaFollette says.

She is based in Little Rock out of the Museum of Discovery, where she was formerly the director of education. She was part of the Arkansas group that wrote the proposal for the five-year grant and made its presentation in January 2006. The money was granted the same day.

Oklahoma officials were supposed to make their proposal to the Reynolds Foundation last month.

"Oklahoma has looked to us as a model, and Nevada will, too," LaFollette says.

As Arkansas network officials planned its structure, they held a meeting of museum officials from around the state. Possible participants were narrowed down to the seven partners.

"They had to be strategically located so we could cover different parts of the state," she says.

Six of the sites are museums or centers with exhibition space. The University of Arkansas Museum, which closed in 2003, was part of this project early on. After it shut down, and because there is no science or technology museum in Northwest Arkansas, the University of Arkansas was chosen as this region's host.

Lynne Hehr, director of the UA Center for Math and Science Education in Fayetteville, agreed to represent the area. The Fayetteville center is one of 12 math and science centers on university and college campuses around the state.

"I said, 'Yes,' because I wanted this opportunity to be available to Northwest Arkansas teachers and students," Hehr says. "It's fun. It's engaging. It's educational entertainment."

For the "Grossology" exhibit, the UA center rented space in Nadine Baum Studios, part of the Walton Arts Center.

The exhibits likely aren't what come to mind when people think of museums, says La-Follette.

"Most people think of a museum exhibit as something you look at but don't touch," she adds.

Research has shown that when people learn through interaction, they absorb the information better and remember it longer.

"We call it free-choice learning or inquiry learning," LaFollette says.

With the "Grossology" exhibit, for example, the "impolite" part of the title is a perfect warning for what's in store. Body odor, burps and runny noses are only part of the featured information.

"It's really a way to teach children about anatomy in avery fun way," LaFollette says. "You laugh about it, but you're going to remember it for a while after you've seen it."

Hehr says the inquiry-based learning is "tying in arts and science and imagination." The exhibits are intended "to address the imagination and the exploration that we as humans enjoy."

Students consider the handson approach more fun than learning from a textbook, she says, because "it's non-threatening. It's not preachy."

Hehr is also on the board of a group planning a regional science and technology museum. Once completed, it would become the Northwest Arkansas member of the Arkansas Discovery Network.

"I'm holding the spot for us," she says.

CERTAINLY A LOT OF FUN

Brad Noll brought his 6-yearold son, Riley, to see the "Grossology" exhibit on its last day in Fayetteville.

Noll, of Springdale, teaches English to seventh-graders. As Noll talked about his impressions of the exhibit, Riley played with the Toot Toot station, which makes vibrating noises.

"It's mostly fun," Noll says. "I'm not sure how educational it is."

The exhibit explores ideas and concepts that might be complex to discuss with children, such as bacteria and hygiene.

"It's making things fun for kids," he says.

Sandra Ware brought her 5-year-old daughter, Emily. She says the exhibit and its topics were child-appropriate.

"It has to be talked about, andthey can do it in a fun way that can be joked about," she says.

She and Emily looked at the Sniff Sniff station, trying to discern smells that included foot and armpit odors.

"The stuff that they can play with and the hands-on [aspect] is great," she says.

The "Grossology" exhibit's Burps and Belches station is basically a burping machine, featuring a big man with a clear belly drinking from a giant soda can. Children pump a lever on the side of the soda can to make clear liquid go up to his mouth. Once it reaches a certain level, he burps. A burp-o-meter measures the effort.

The station also offers trivia and tips: On average, people burp 15 times a day. One can bring on a burp by lying on his stomach and resting on his elbows.

About 10,000 people saw "Grossology" in Fayetteville, Hehr says. She scheduled public, private and home school groups from Arkansas, Oklahoma and Missouri.

The UA center provides professional development to teachers of K-12 classes and college courses. When the teachers headed back to their classrooms after seeing "Grossology," Hehr gave them more information and activities to use in instruction. She can provide information to teachers across the state through the other center sites.

GETTING 'GOOD VIBRATIONS'

The Arkansas Discovery Network rented the "Grossology" exhibit, which will finish its state tour in January 2009. The consortium bought "Good Vibrations," an exhibit built specifically for Arkansas by Exploratorium, a museum in San Francisco. That exhibit focuses on weather, sound, light, geology and motion.

"Good Vibrations" was at the Museum of Discovery from January to April. Through July 8, it will be at the Arkansas State University Museum in Jonesboro.

These exhibits can also draw more attention and visitors to the host sites, LaFollette says. That should bring more community awareness and maybe more supporters and donors, she says.

A 40-foot truck called "The Race for Planet X" is literally a museum on wheels. It will begin a tour of the state this fall.

While the other exhibits will visit those seven fixed sites, the "Planet X" truck can be much more flexible in where it goes.

"That is the one thing that is really going to serve the mission of getting to rural kids," LaFollette says.

The truck's 10 exhibits focus on science and engineering, aligned with state requirements for sixth-graders, she says. The premise is that a new planet has been discovered, and the students are exploring it through different activities.

"All they have to do is get out of the classroom, go to the truck and have a great learning experience," she says. "And there's only one of these in the country."

This network of museums and the traveling truck connect the formal education of school and the informal education of a museum.

"Informal learning has a real place in getting people excited," LaFollette says. Then, teachers build on that excitement with formal education in the classroom on the same concepts, she says.

As part of the grant, teachers are sent for one month during the summer to the Exploratorium Summer Teacher Institute in San Francisco. They are "immersed in hands-on, inquirybased exploration," Hehr says. Eight teachers went last year, and six will go this year.

The network will have other exhibits built, including "Mystery of the Mayan Medallion," which will be designed by a New York firm and built in Omaha, Neb. It involves concepts related to archaeology.

At the end of its five-year Reynolds Foundation grant, theArkansas Discovery Network will have to find other funding. Organizers will seek other grants, partnerships, sponsors and donors.

More information on the Arkansas Discovery Network is available at www.arkansasdiscoverynetwork.org . For details on "The Race for Planet X," email planetx@amod.org)

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