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## Creating a Culture of Inclusion in Children's Museums: The Community of Stories Performance / Workshop

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### Understanding Differences, Challenging Discrimination

Community of Stories is a performance/workshop project created to promote discussion about diversity and discrimination among children's museum staff. Community of Stories is based on the following beliefs:

- Discrimination and prejudice limit children's lives and their opportunities to succeed in our changing world.
- Sharing stories about our own experiences can heighten our understanding about differences, broaden our definition of "diversity" and help us to be better prepared to deal with discrimination and insensitivity in our museums and our communities.
- We can become better role models for children through personal efforts to understand and address issues of discrimination within our museums, while also enhancing our organizational capacity to attract, welcome and serve diverse audiences

In 2005, a diverse group of staff at Brooklyn Children's Museum initiated the *Community of Stories* project with performances created from responses to the following simple prompts: *I was born...*; *I remember...*; *I realize...*; *I wish...*; *I am...*; and *My hope is...* Performances were combined with participatory workshop activities to promote reflection and dialogue about issues of diversity, discrimination, inclusion and institutional change.

*Community of Stories* arose from lessons learned from Brooklyn Children's Museum's educational work with children, teens and families. Sharing personal stories is a powerful way to make connections between people. It evolved from internal discussions about the challenges the organization faces in carrying out its educational mission to "encourage children to develop an understanding of and respect for themselves, others and the world around them." While many of the museum's programs for children were focused on building greater cultural understanding, staff did not always feel prepared to "practice what we preach." Diversity plans, policies and programs were recognized as important, but alone, were not effective tools for changing attitudes and working relationships. A small group of staff members from different departments came together to create a project that would be inclusive and sustainable, with the goal of promoting ongoing internal discussions and collective learning about issues of diversity. The project has opened up dialogue among staff about diversity and discrimination at Brooklyn Children's Museum and is being expanded nationally at other museums and educational organizations.

Maxine Baxter, a participant in the Community of Stories, grew up in the Bedford-Stuyvesant—“Bed-Stuy”—neighborhood of Brooklyn. She has worked at Brooklyn Children’s Museum for twenty-eight years and is currently a manager in the Education Department. Her story reveals the longlasting power of a childhood memory and how it has affected her life.

*I am* a descendant of an African people who were taken from their homes and brought here; yet we still strive to be the great people that we are. I am the daughter of David Adair, who was born in Gaston, Alabama, and of Ellen Mae Smith Adair, who was born in Ridge Spring, South Carolina. I am my mother’s fifth child and her first girl (Oh Happy Day!). I am the sister of six brothers and three sisters. I am the wife of Milton Baxter, the mother of Gerard and Eric Baxter and the grandmother of Bryce Baxter. I am Maxine Baxter, born and raised in Bed-Stuy.

*I remember* when I was a little girl, my mother would take us with her to see her girlfriend who lived on Fulton St. in Bedford/Stuyvesant. Whenever we went to her friend’s house, my brother would be very excited. As we were getting ready to go, my brother would get more and more excited. The more he became excited, the more I would get nervous. When we would get to my mother’s friend’s house, my mother would say, “Maxine, take your brother and sister to see the trains.” I knew this would be coming. We always went to see the trains when we went to her house. I would walk with my sister and brother six blocks to see the model trains. As we walked those six blocks, my mind would be racing and worrying about how we would be treated because I knew that we might be the only black kids there. Would we be told that we couldn’t come in or would we be ignored? We were always ignored in the past by the all white staff. In the past, I sometimes feared we would be asked to leave. I was so worried that I couldn’t enjoy anything. I was too busy making sure that my brother and sister did not do anything that would make it bad for us. We never stayed too long because I was too nervous. Looking back on this as an adult, I thought that if we were not allowed to go in, it would be the worst that could happen, but now, I think being treated as if we were invisible was worse. It was 1955. I was ten, my brother was six and my sister was nine when I took them to the Brooklyn Children’s Museum.

*I realize* now that you never know when you will have the chance to make a difference in changing things for the better. Who knew that I would be working at Brooklyn Children’s Museum twenty-five years later and that I would have the opportunity to make people feel welcomed and never invisible? One thing that I have learned is that when people feel unwelcomed and unequal, it can look like so many different things: such as withdrawal, which is what I did; it can also look like anger, fear, loud and rowdy behavior, inappropriate laughter, grandiose attitudes, bullying, lying, etc.

*I wish* to keep my heart open to people’s differences and not allow the ugliness and pain of racism to make me closed-minded. I wish to always be ready to hear about another person’s feelings and experiences, and not be judgmental.

*I am* who I am today based mostly on my relationships with my family. These relationships have encouraged me to be a team player, organizer, leader, great listener and facilitator. I am very creative and inspirational. I am compassionate about children reaching their full potential in life.

*My hope* is that the staff at Brooklyn Children’s Museum will happily welcome anyone who comes through the door and treat them as if we want to be sure that they come back.

*Will you share your story with me?*

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