



A quarterly publication of the Association of Children's Museums

Gifts from Our Visitors

Eleanor Chin, Clarity Partners Coaching

This article first appeared in the Winter 2006 Volume 20 Number 4 issue, "Keeping It Real: Stories from the Floor." © Association of Children's Museums. All rights reserved. Mary Maher is the *Hand to Hand* editor; MMaher2049@aol.com.

In an article I wrote for *Hand to Hand* in 1993, I described the visitor services staff as the museum's nervous system: "the major receptors of the messages from our curious, confused, elated, distressed, sated and fatigued visitors." Fourteen years later, I believe the analogy holds up well. In their words and their behavior, visitors send us messages about what they like and don't like, what works and doesn't work, what matched their expectations and what didn't. The museum's front line staff is often the first to receive these messages.

Admittedly, some of the messages are easier to receive and interpret than others, but all of us who work in museums need to hear them. The stories included here reflect the whole range of human drama in our museums. Frank, poignant, humorous moments elicit deeply personal reflections of the joys and challenges of working on the front lines with visitors. Through reading them, we can come to appreciate the richness of the human moments that our visitors bring us and the deep commitment of our front line staff expressed in between the lines of their stories.

In an era that is becoming increasingly dependent on technology, human moments are being touted as revolutionary for business. Psychiatrist and brain researcher Dr. Edward Hallowell talks about the power of human connection in his landmark article "The Human Moment at Work": "The positive effects of a human moment can last long after the people involved have said goodbye and walked away. People begin to think in new and creative ways. Mental activity is stimulated." In the context of our museums, the human moments that our visitors encounter prepare them for the rich learning we offer.

As I read these stories, I am also reminded of how courageous it is for front line staff to bring their best to visitor interactions—no matter what—day after day. Behind the scenes, we've seen that strategies such as mutual support systems, humor, empathy and genuine love of working with people are key to maintaining the spirit and appetite for public interaction. Another useful outlook that front line staff often strive for is a *positive perspective*. What does it look like to maintain a positive perspective? I recall a book about customer service called *A Complaint is a Gift* that changed my perspective as a front line staffer. In the title I discovered a revolutionary paradigm shift about customer complaints—complaints are free feedback on customers' needs and expectations. If we can view complaints as gifts, we are well on our way to gaining a positive perspective as front line staff.

Of course, not all of the visitors' gifts are complaints. The stories here reflect the complex relationship we have with our visitors. Proud of our customer service culture, we always respect our visitors yet occasionally we are surprised by what happens on the floor. But beyond the joy and frustration, these stories are a rare opportunity for all staff to experience what the front line staff experience. Our challenge as museum staff is to ask ourselves what can we take away as the gift, indeed the learning, from each interaction? For example, when visitors keep asking the same question, maybe they're telling us

something about how to improve our signage or services. Are we willing to truly listen and then question the way we've always done things if they aren't working? How are the visitors' questions, confusions and yes, complaints, trying to help us become better at serving them? These questions suggest organizational self-examination and visitor focus at all levels of our institutions. The most successful museums know that serving visitors well requires a museum-wide effort. And experience has taught us that leadership from the highest levels is especially critical to anchoring any cross-functional efforts. As museum staff we must ask ourselves what we can do to provide real support, respect and *value* (in every sense of the word) for front line staff. Supporting the staff that support visitors is the foundation of an authentic visitor-focus mindset for our museums.

Ultimately, by seeing visitor stories as gifts and sharing the visitor focus institutionally, we gain a vision of what's possible when we shift our perspectives on the importance of listening to stories about visitor contact. It leads us to be curious about the visitor experience in new ways. We can imagine the possibilities as we read these stories by asking ourselves: How could our museums be different if we viewed all interactions with visitors—including the messes, eruptions and complaints—as gifts to our own learning?

In 1993 Eleanor Chin co-edited with Kathryn Hill, the first (ever) issue on museum Visitor Services for Hand to Hand. After twenty-two years at the Boston Children's Museum, consulting in the museum profession and ten years in the private sector, Eleanor now runs her own business, Clarity Partners Coaching and Consulting, working with individuals and businesses to improve personal and professional effectiveness.

REFERENCES

- Barlow, Janelle, and Claus Møller. *A Complaint is a Gift*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, Inc., 1996.
- Hallowell, Edward M. "The Human Moment At Work." *Harvard Business Review*, Jan/Feb, 1999.