

CLEVELAND, OHIO

The Cleveland Museum of Art

The institution and many of the people it wanted to reach had little stories they told themselves about each other.

“They don’t live far away, and admission is free. They must just prefer to watch TV.”

*“We’re not welcome there, and, besides,
who wants to put on a suit and tie to go look at some paintings?”*

“You’d think they’d encourage their kids to come.”

“Children aren’t allowed in a place like that.”

“This exhibit is about their culture, and we put posters all over their community.

Why aren’t they here?”

“They look down on you if you don’t have a college degree in art.”

The Cleveland Museum of Art wanted to be more involved with the whole Greater Cleveland community; many people in the area knew about the Museum, but had never been there. Then, in 1996, the Museum began a three-year initiative, funded by the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund, called *Convening The Community*. But how do you convene people you don’t know?

“Well,” says Nancy McAfee, the Museum’s Manager of Outreach and Community Development, “you meet people and you get to know each other a little. We were interested in people from neighborhoods, not zip codes; interested in individuals, not numbers. We wanted to tackle communities, not ethnicities. So I just started to talk to people, people in lots of different neighborhoods and towns. I’d start with somebody I knew, and [move] out to people they knew, and to...people they knew. I went out and met more than one hundred people – librarians, ministers, politicians, social service providers, neighborhood activists – and I’d ask them ‘tell me about your community, what kind of life do people seem to want, how do they use their leisure time?’ We ended up with about 25 people who each [knew] their community as well as [had] some kind of authority and some kind of social or personal power. Then we asked them to be on a Community Advisory Council. This Council now informs almost everything we do. They help us design the labels for the art, they helped us re-design the map and guide to the galleries. Without their pushing we actually would probably not have had Spanish language labels and audio tours for the Diego Rivera exhibit. We began to see them as intelligent and sensitive colleagues and they began to see the Museum as another organization, like the church or the PTA, with goals, standards, obligations, and moral and legal commitments. In other words, we were much more a part of each other’s life understanding.

“Everybody’s eyes have opened a bit to what a museum can be. We made an informal video introduction to the Museum, hosted by the then Manager of the Cleveland Indians, Mike Hargrove (and, in the process, I became a rabid baseball fan). Our staff that meets visitors has become more open and understanding of how to treat people. Many more people of many different kinds have come to the Museum. We are seen in a different light in town. The Transit Agency asked our advice about how a new line might run up into our area. A local school asked us to help out with an after-school program. I overheard someone tell a friend that another cultural institution ‘only cares about the elite, but that Museum – it’s wide open.’ ”

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