

GUEST EDITORIAL/GASSKRYWERSRUBRIEK

MUSEUMS IN THE SERVICE OF THE COMMUNITY

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In the popular imagination, museums are generally thought to be musty, dusty, muted places where one is forced to show an interest in all kinds of things that one couldn't really care less about.

In fact one of my favourite definitions of a museum was penned by an eight year old, and refers equally to the contents of a museum, as the people who work there. She wrote:

"I think a museum is a place where very old and precious (sic) things are put, such as animals and old people who lived long ago."

Although it may be tempting to find amusement in this touchingly candid statement, it is also a sobering thought to realize that many, many people would wholeheartedly endorse this as their idea of a museum too. For those of us who work in museums however, there is no doubt that we work in dynamic and exciting institutions, and through the pages of this journal hope to make you aware of the role of the 'living' museum and the services it can provide to the community.

The official definition of a museum states that it is '... a non-profit making permanent institution in the services of society and of its development, and open to the public which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits for purposes of study, education and enjoyment material evidence of man and his environment.'

Thus museums have several functions:

- to acquire
- to conserve
- to research
- to communicate and exhibit material evidence of man and his environment.

The essence of any museum and that which sets it uniquely apart from other institutions is its collect-

ions of authentic *objects* which are its central and most priceless resource. If museums have several functions, they have but one aim - that of *EDUCATION*. If we consider education to mean everything that serves to give an individual more knowledge about the world he lives in, irrespective of the way this is achieved, then the enormous potential for educational outreach by museums becomes apparent. Museums are literally sitting on goldmines of educational material that could help to foster cognitive and aesthetic growth especially in children. Using authentic objects children are encouraged to make observations from firsthand evidence, providing a far more concrete experience than the usual two dimensional pictures of the classroom and textbook.

Within museums, the tools of a teacher's trade lie ready for use, but it is unfortunately true that although teachers may be interested in museums, their approach has usually been passive in so far as using it in their teaching is concerned. Perhaps they feel they do not have time for extra subjects and responsibilities such as these, but how, on the other hand, can they afford to neglect one of their greatest resources, especially when it is freely offered?

Finally - what of Outdoor Education, is it a valid function of museums? We in museums say 'yes'. We firmly believe that objects should not only be studied within the 'freeze frame' of the museum, would but that students should also be taken into the environment to experience objects within the whole context of everything around them. Thus, museums around the country are adopting the attitude, education *by* museums, not merely *in* museums. Broadly stated, the goal of a museum could be something like, ... the furthering of man's understanding of himself, his society, and the natural world of which he is part. We are uniquely and perfectly poised to achieve this. 'Museums stretch your mind'. Use your museum, it is there to serve you.

