

Jessie Gillan
Project 2: Case Study
Brooklyn Children's Museum
Education Outreach: Executive Summary

- **History of the Museum – 1st Children's Museum in United States (maybe world) opened in 1899.**
 - Keeps expanding size, handles more the 400,000 visitors a year.
 - Fulfills the prescribed requirements to be considered a true museum.
- **Interviewed Kayla Dove, Director of Education**
 - Her background, arts & science and in the field of museum education for 16 years.
- **Mistakenly thought that the new renovation moved them to a new location.**
 - Members of the community (Crown Heights) were included in the planning.
- **Target Age/Common Visitor: 0 -12 years old and their adult caregivers, approximately 60% of the families have a child 5 or younger.**
- **Working with schools: Over 800 programs serving 18,638 students, teachers, and chaperons.**
- **Most popular educational activities: performances, workshops, and live animal encounter (always full)**
- **Most popular exhibits in the museum: Market, Pizzeria, and Community Garden**
- **Rooftop used for free Family Fun Night, Outdoor Dining, Daytime Performances and Activities (Weather Permitting).**
- **Library has not been utilized to its fullest potential mostly used for storytelling, computer games, quiet space, and crafts.**
- **Funding: Sponsorship of exhibits, plus funding from federal, state, and city funds. Also corporate grants and competitive grants such as NSF and IMLS.**
- **Creative input of the staff is always through teamwork and building on ideas.**
- **How to get into the field of children's museum education: volunteering and internship (authentic experience).**

Case Study: Brooklyn Children's Museum

Jessie Gillan

Interviewed: Kayla Dove, Director of Education at the Brooklyn Children's Museum

It was a bit of a cloudy and rainy day when I visited the Brooklyn Children's Museum located in the Crown Heights neighborhood in Brooklyn. Nestled in between a Hasidic community and a hard-edged African American community the Brooklyn Children's museum is just outside of Brower Park and has recently re-opened in 2008. The reconstruction of the museum was to update outdated exhibits, increase size, and perhaps most importantly to become the first green museum in New York City. On the day of my visit, I spoke with some of the staff and visitors of the museum and learned quite a great deal about the educational possibilities held within this charming museum. On that day in particular I did not speak with the Director of Education, Kayla Dove, but conducted an interview with her through e-mail and over the phone the following week.

The Brooklyn Children's Museum is the first children's museum in the United States and possibly the world. The museum was opened in 1899 by Anna Billings Gallup and is now widely considered to be the pioneer along with William H. Goodyear who was the curator for the Fine Arts Museum in Brooklyn at the same time. Initially the museum focused on natural sciences because Gallup had a background in biology. The hands-on approach to education within the museum combined with a traditional exhibition style garnered the museum much success. The museum has had to continuously gain size

since the onset, when it was first housed in a Victorian home to today's location that sees over 400,000 visitors a year.¹

My first misstep in the interview of the director of education was to believe that they had once again shifted locations with the new re-opening of the museum in 2008. Kayla Dove, Director of Education, informed me that the museum re-opened on the same location that they were previously. The museum is juxtaposed in between two very different communities and it is not the easiest to get to by public transit, so my first concern spawned from this observation. However, I was pleasantly surprised, from when I first entered the museum it was clear that the museum was very focused on bringing together not only these two communities but also all of the communities within the city. Many of the programs have a multi-cultural nature for example an upcoming program on Los Dios de los Muertos. It seemed everywhere that I turned in the museum that I found something celebrating a different culture's heritage and teaching fundamental parts to the visitors. Surprisingly, I expected because of the difficult nature getting to the museum using public transit and the neighborhood that there would not be as busy as it was, the museum was absolutely filled with children and their caregivers.

As stated previously the museum sees over 400,000 visitors every year. The price of admission is \$7.50 and is free for visitors under 1; on top of this the museum accepts members for special programs and discounted rates beginning at \$85 dollars for a year membership. Also, school groups with advanced reservations are discounted to \$6 per person. The museum relies on this admission price for some of their funding. Dove stated that corporate sponsors sponsor some of their exhibits, which helps a great deal. Beyond that the entire museum is funded by federal, state, and city funds and also corporate and

¹ Information on history and current statistics from <http://www.brooklynkids.org>

competitive grants such as NSF (National Science Foundation) and IMLS (Institute of Museum and Library Services).

The museum was a wide variety of children on the day that I visited, and I was curious what statistics have been compiled about the visitors of the museum. From Dove I learned that the target age of the museum's programming and exhibits is for zero to twelve-year-olds, although they have found that over 60% over the visitors are five years old or younger. For the most part it seemed that the general child age was about 8 and younger the day that I visited, I would have been surprised to see a child older than this unless they were accompanying their younger siblings. Most of the exhibits seemed to be focused on a younger child.

The biggest attraction seemed to be the center space entitled "World Brooklyn" where there were seven mock storefronts, sewer system, MTA bus, and nature area. Most of the items within these were set up for easy access for a young child primarily focusing on objects that children can pick up and explore their use. The most popular of all of these storefronts was clearly the market; I was surprised at the popularity of grabbing a basket and collecting different groceries and bringing them to a check out. This was perhaps the most simple of the stores and definitely most successful. There were many great ideas implemented in throughout the museum and especially in the stores, from basic exhibition style with an object and a label to being able to jump inside a Chinese dragon costume.

The second floor of the museum is home to their permanent collection exhibit, library, café, and a rooftop terrace. The café was quite large and even though the day that I visited had an enormous amount of people, was pretty empty, so perhaps this was bad planning. Mainly, I think the problem with the café is that they do not have a menu visible; I was going to get something small to eat and could not find anywhere where they listed

the food available. Next to the café they have about five party rooms set up for birthdays, which were also all in use, these are reserved many months in advance because of high demand. To the left of the café there were bathrooms, the bathrooms were okay not the best maintained and for having a large populous of small children were not very kid friendly.

The library followed the bathrooms and had remarkably short hours (only open two hours of a given open day). I spoke with the “librarian” on duty that day and found out that mainly his job is to watch over the crafts tables, which was slightly disappointing because they had a large collection of books and computers also in this space. Dove stated that it is very under utilized and many parents see it as a quiet space where they can read to their kids and have a bit of a break. The books, I noticed, were bar-coded so I immediately questioned the librarian on if they had a check-out policy, and he said that there was no check-out option but visitors are welcome to carry the books around the entirety of the museum (there was a drop box before you left for objects that visitors decided to carry from place to place).

The rooftop is a place for events, programming, and outdoor dining. The most popular educational programs according to Dove are performances, workshops, and their “Live Animal Encounter” these she stated, “are always full.” This makes complete sense at the entrance to the museum they have a number of flyers detailing their programs and breaking them into categories including: Science, Arts & Culture, School, & Early Learner. They also had similar flyers for birthdays, memberships, and an upcoming monster’s mash festival. In class we have discussed the importance of school programming so I was curious about their school specific programming and how it would differentiate from the typical programming. Dove stated that the museum in the past year held “almost 800

school specific programs serving over 18,638 students, teachers, and chaperons” a very specific number it seemed. They must rely on these numbers heavily for funding potential and also getting more schools to visit. The flyer does not go above the 6th grade level (most focusing on 1st grade and below) and focuses on having both classroom lessons and self-guided exploration through the museum.

The top floor overall was very interesting because it did house their permanent collection as well, which seemed to really be a great spot for acclimating a child to the museum environment. Incorporating hands-on exhibits along with traditional were really outstanding to witness, also it included the process of a creating a detailed museum exhibition as well including labeling and object choice. In addition to this exhibit it had a travelling exhibit of “TOP SECRET: Mission Toy” which did not seem to grab the attention of many visitors and was somewhat lackluster in comparison with the rest of the museum.

The Brooklyn Children’s Museum really has a lot on its hands when it comes to education outreach. I knew this going in, but after observing and speaking with Kayla Dove it incredibly obvious the amount of work that goes into an entire museum dedicated to children and education. I am quite interested in one day being in a position such as Kayla is and so I asked what she recommended for getting to her level, she believes that true hands-on experience in a children’s museum is the best way to get a foot in the door through internships and volunteering. From there her background is in both the arts & sciences and she has over sixteen years of experience directly in children’s museum education. I completely recommend the museum and was inspired by many of their ideas of outreach and education.