

Land of Extremes

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AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY CONFERENCE

Spreading knowledge through communication

BY NEAL V. HITCH | Special to this Newspaper/Imperial Valley

You may not know this, but the Desert Museum has been creating innovative and non-traditional programs that are presented as models for other institutions. Director Neal Hitch chaired a session on artist-in-residence programs at the American Alliance of Museums annual conference in May. In September he is chairing a session entitled “Achieving the Impossible: Completing Projects that Seem Unlikely,” at the American Association of State and Local History conference in Louisville. This past week Anne Morgan, our head curator, presented at the Society of American Archivists annual conference on non-traditional outreach programs.

You do what?

The Society of American Archivists is the national association of professional archivists, with members from across the globe. The annual conference, held this year in Cleveland, Ohio, with nearly 1,800 attendees, provided an opportunity to make connections with the people, ideas and tools to move archives and museums into the 21st century.

Anne Morgan participated in one of 70 educational sessions that offered practical tips attendees could use to develop programs at their own institutions. She presented alongside colleagues from Troy Historic Village, Davidson College, Thomas Jefferson University and the University of Massachusetts, Boston, in a session entitled “You Do What? Nontraditional Outreach That Works.”

303 You Do What? Nontraditional Outreach that Works

With the common goal of expanding beyond traditional archival advocacy methods, this diverse group of panelists discusses nontraditional outreach activities within their institutions. Speakers include archivists and curators from a private liberal arts college, a museum, a historic village, a mid-size public university, and a private health services university. They discuss how archivists and museum curators can forge connections with a wide variety of communities and grow our profession via new and creative approaches to outreach programs.

Anne's presentation — bridging the gap

Today, museums face a challenge of how to bridge economic, geographic, linguistic and cultural gaps to engage a traditionally non-museum-going population. At the Imperial Valley Desert Museum we have a lot of experience with this challenge, especially considering that we have archaeological collections, which statistically engage fewer visitors than other type of museums.

Our solution has been to take the strongest part of our collection and build an art program around it.

This became our Coiled Clay Art program, built around our collection of over 200 intact, or nearly intact, ceramic vessels. The collection represents 1,000 years of ceramic tradition in Southern California. The goal of our program is that each student will participate in the program at least four times before they graduate high school.

We started the program by bringing ollas into art classrooms and talking to

students about local ceramic traditions, how they were made, and how the method hasn't changed in over 1,000 years. The students got to see the ollas up close, and then they got to try making their own pots.

The program's real breakthrough came when we learned how to adapt the program to work with a large number of kids at once, and we started going to fairs and festivals.

Art fairs, children's fairs, county fairs, Earth Day fairs, music festivals. Anywhere there are kids and crafts — we were there!

Surprisingly, we've discovered that in many ways, it is easier to do fairs than classrooms. We only need one staff person and a few volunteers who can

be trained on the spot. We have found that some kids will sit for an hour working on one piece, while others only last five minutes. They listen when you talk about why they are making a pot, and the parents ask lots of questions about the museum while the kids are working.

Everyone gets involved because everyone loves clay! It is fun to get your hands dirty. Through the fairs and festivals this has become our signature program. The outreach extends even further: even if you pass our table without participating, you are receiving our mission and message.

We now always make sure to have a coiled clay table at onsite events we hold at the museum. It is a program that connects people with the museum and our collections no matter what else we have going on.

It's also a program that can be tailored to meet California curriculum standards for multiple grade levels. As a field trip module, the program is designed so that the same student could participate in a field trip in the fourth grade and in the sixth grade and learn something different. It seamlessly integrates multiple disciplines and topics the students are covering in class.



Anne Morgan presents at the SAA annual conference in Cleveland, Ohio. PHOTOS COURTESY OF NEAL V. HITCH

Lessons we have learned

1. First off, start small. Test your ideas out on your staff's and volunteers' kids. Learn the natural limits of your program and how to make them flexible. We tested the coiled clay program with just five kids from Ocotillo.

2. Practice makes perfect — but only if you learn from your mistakes! The original clay we used was red. It was very authentic-looking and the finished pots looked great. But the clay stuck to everything, it stained everything and never, ever came out of clothes. Just the way to make parents love you! It took experimenting with eight different kinds of clay before we found one that was easy to work with and easy to clean up.

BELOW: As our signature outreach program, over 1,200 youth make coiled clay art at fairs & festivals annually.

Start Small: Test Your Ideas



ABOVE: In 2011, the Coiled Clay Art program at IVDM was piloted with family and friends at the museum.

Learn by Doing



Celebrate the Results!

Learn from your mistakes

3. Begin with your program objectives. Are you just looking to increase your audience, or do you want clear learning points? Never underestimate the value of osmosis — learn while doing.

4. And most importantly: celebrate the results! We've exhibited kids' work at the museum, in schools, and at fairs; we've done blog posts about it; and now use Twitter and Instagram. Kids love to show off their work. So let them!