**Land of Extremes**

**AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY CONFERENCE**

**Spreading knowledge through communication**

**Y**ou may not know this, but the Desert Museum has been creating innovative and non-traditional outreach programs that are presented as models for other institutions. Director Neil 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.

**Anne’s presentation — bridging the gap**

*Today, museums face a challenge of how to bridge economic, graphic, 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 types 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 1,200 intact, or nearly intact, ollas into art classrooms and talking to students about local ceramic traditions, how they were made, and how the method changed in over 1,000 years. The students get to see the ollas up close, and then they get 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.

At the fair we presented our Talavera, dia de los muertos, fair earth day, fair music festivals. Anywhere there are kids and crafts — we’ve been 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 fair and festivals this has become our signature program. The outreach extends even further, even if you park at a fair without participating, you are receiving our message and outreach.

We now always make sure to have a cooled clay table at outdoor 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 as 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.

**Lessons we have learned**

1. First off, start small. Test your ideas out on your staff and volunteers. 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 too sticky and required kids to get sticky hands. We changed to a more malleable clay that everyone loves! It took experimenting with eight different clays before we found one that was easy to work with and easy to clean up.

**Learn by Doing**

**Start Small: Test Your Ideas**

- Learn from your mistakes

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

**Anne Morgan presents at the SAA annual conference in Cleveland, Ohio. Photo courtesy of Neal V. Hitch.**

**QUESTIONS? Contact Copy Editor Esteban Ortiz at 760-337-3431 or eortiz@ivpressonline.com**

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