In 1989, a group of children's museums in the Pacific Northwest came together to set a collegial standard that has persisted: they decided to collaborate, rather than compete, and to stake a regional claim on the emerging field of children's museum professionals.

In Washington State, along the I-5 corridor, children's museums in Everett, Seattle, Tacoma, and Olympia joined the Oregon museums in Portland and Salem to anchor the newly formed Northwest Association of Youth Museums (NWAYM), a regional subset of the Association of Youth Museums (now ACM). At the time, due to considerable geographic distance, and with online communication in its infancy, there was a sense that the larger organization did not have as strong a connection to the Pacific Northwest museums as they did to members in other regions. Travel to national conferences, expensive and time-consuming, was limited to a handful of senior staff. There were also opportunities and challenges common to the museums of the Pacific Northwest, and it became clear that there was an advantage to sharing knowledge and resources locally.

NWAYM directors and senior staff held joint gatherings, rotating among member museums and sharing what they learned in their still-fledgling field. A larger number of museum staff gathered more easily and inexpensively at NWAYM regional meetings, catching up and comparing notes. They welcomed emerging museums and visited en masse when museums opened in Skagit County, Washington, or Medford, Oregon. Over time, more children's museums sprouted in an ever-widening region. When children's museums opened in Alaska and Idaho, they were invited to join.

Thirty-three years later, the group has grown and expanded its reach. It welcomes allied professionals as well—including designers, architects, and exhibit fabricators—and invites inspirational business and civic leaders to engage with the group. Today there are twenty children's museums and science centers, of all shapes and sizes, established anywhere between one to seventy-five years ago, who work together in NWAYM to make each other—and the field—better.

Growing a Regional Association

In the last decade, NWAYM has become a more formal entity, providing several annual opportunities for cooperation among the region's children's museum and science center professionals. It holds an annual spring conference, generally trading off between Washington and Oregon locations. This allows large groups of staff and board members—sometimes 150-200 attendees—to gather for keynote presentations, themed discussions, and updates from each museum on programs, accomplishments, and initiatives. Each year, in the fall, ten to fifteen museum directors gather for transparent, honest, "cone of silence" conversations, acting as both colleagues and mentors to each other as their organizations face changes in growth, staffing, impact, advocacy, and community engagement.

The advantages of this regional cooperative are numerous. But perhaps the most intriguing, and least measurable, advantage is a region-wide contingent of children's museum members who visit and support museums outside of their home towns. Each member museum has a unique, place-based personality, from Hands On Children's Museum in Olympia, with 28,000 square feet
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NWAYM: By the Numbers
Established: 1989
Current members: 21
Cost of membership: $50, $75 or $100 per museum, depending on annual budget
Admission discount: 25% off admission for up to 4 people, with a peer museum membership
Size of the region: Four states: OR, WA, ID, AK
Seattle, WA to Boise, ID: 490 miles

NWAYM-participating museums:
Adventure! Children’s Museum (Eugene, OR)
Children's Museum of Eastern Oregon (Pendleton, OR)
Children’s Museum of Idaho (Meridian, Boise, ID)
Children’s Museum of the Magic Valley (Twin Falls, ID) (Emerging)
Children’s Museum of Tacoma (Tacoma, WA)
Children’s Museum of Skagit County (Burlington, WA)
Children’s Museum of Southern Oregon (formerly Kid Time, Medford, OR)
Children’s Museum of Walla Walla (Walla Walla, WA)
Eugene Science Center (Eugene, OR)
Fairbanks Children’s Museum (Fairbanks, AK)
Gilbert House Children’s Museum ( Salem, OR)
Hands On Children’s Museum (Olympia, WA)
Imagine Children’s Museum (Everett, WA)
Kids’ Discovery Museum (KiDiMu) (Bainbridge Island, WA)
Kids’ Quest Children’s Museum (Bellevue, WA)
Mobius Discovery Center (Spokane, WA)
Seattle Children’s Museum (Seattle, WA)
Umpqua Discovery Center (Reedsport, OR)
Whatcom Museum Family Interaction Gallery (FIG) (Bellingham, WA)
WonderWorks Children’s Museum of the Gorge (The Dalles, OR)
Yakima Valley Museum (Yakima, WA)

The museums that are part of NWAYM are quite different from each other. They each reflect their community: founders, board members, and staff have their own sense of what will resonate with the children and families they serve. Each museum has its own aesthetic sensibility, and each has developed a unique range of both on-site and outreach programs. The strength of the association is not that it encourages museums to converge or imitate each other. If anything, it has strengthened their individuality, as each museum team is encouraged to find and cultivate its own voice, and anchor itself in its surrounding community. Member museum staff are innovative and creative—sometimes borrowing ideas or techniques from each other, but usually putting

Cover photo: Left to right, Gretchen Wilson Prangley, Play Africa; Putter Bert, KidsQuest; Patty Belmonte, Hands On Children’s Museum; Sunny Spicer, The Children’s Museum of Southern Oregon (formerly Kid Time Children’s Museum); Tanya Durand, Greentrike; Susie Glass Burdick (former executive director), KiDiMu; Ruth Shelley, (former executive director) of the now-closed Portland Children’s Museum.
mid all the unknowns since March 2020, I held fast to one constant: a standing appointment on Wednesdays at 3:30 p.m. EST. The almost weekly ACM Leadership Call, with Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) staff and other children’s museum directors, became my North star, my therapy group, and—in the darkest days of the shut-down—my primary social outlet!

How do you run a children’s museum without visitors? How do you pay the bills without income? Where should we turn for help? Executive directors logged on from around the globe and took turns presenting whatever new tactics we were trying or commiserating about the layoffs we were implementing (sometimes our own). But mostly, my sibling museum directors and I would hang on every word during the Leadership Call’s weekly advocacy updates, shared by Jeannette Thomas, formerly ACM’s senior director of development and advocacy. She translated the mysterious world of Washington politics with the comforting assurances and sense of mischief of the best babysitter ever. She kept us in the loop, but more than that, she trained us how to help ourselves. “Reach out to your legislators,” she would say, over and over. “Tell them how you are doing, and then tell me how it went.”

As the first COVID spring crept into COVID summer, I listened every week, but there wasn’t much she could offer, but she was nice, and that helped. As the pandemic went on, I kept calling. I called the mayor, the Chamber of Commerce, and various state politicians. The outcome was sometimes, “I’ll look for any programs you might apply for,” or usually, “I’m so sorry.”

I told them all about how children’s museums are a hybrid of education, tourism, and the arts, and that it was going to take us a long time to recover. When the federal Shuttered Venue Operator Grants (SVOG) came out—tantalizing us with a possible award of 45 percent of our 2019 income, and then blocking us because we didn’t have a “fixed seating performance venue”—I added that to my spiel about how children’s museums were falling through the cracks and needed special help.

Then, in March 2021, I finally called my local state senator. “Wow, that sounds terrible,” he said. “We’ve got all this stimulus money coming in...let’s put a line in for your museum. How much do you need?”

You would think I’d be ready for that question! Um...$20,000? $40,000? $100,000?

He told me the state was developing a strategy on how to distribute much larger amounts. He said, “I could put in a line just for Kidcity, or maybe for all the children’s museums in the state together? How many are there? How many people do you all see, combined, in a year?”

Again, I was stumped. I explained that the Connecticut children’s museums were all very independent; we didn’t really know each other very well. I couldn’t even tell him how many there were. Even though I have children’s museum BFF’s around the country, staff from the local museums had only rarely been in touch with each other. That’s how it had been for the twenty-two years that Kidcity opened.

Then I thought of those Wednesday calls. I had seen a few Connecticut names
Supporting Leaders | Building Healthy Organizations

An Interview with Darren Macfee, Museum Roundtable Facilitator

Interviewed by Mary Maher, Editor

Darren Macfee’s career began in fundraising as the director of development at a regional rehabilitation hospital. In 2006, he entered the museum field as the executive director of the Lincoln Children’s Museum (Nebraska). In 2012 he struck out on his own as an independent consultant, focusing on strategy, governance, and leadership. He assumed leadership of the Museum Director Roundtables from John and Anita Durel in 2018 when they retired.

The Museum Director Roundtables were started in 1999 by the Durels. Their format was based on that of groups of fitness club owners who, under the leadership of John Durel’s colleague and mentor Will Phillips, would get together and share best practices.

Each Roundtable is comprised of eight to ten executive directors or CEOs of geographically diverse museums of all types—children’s museums, history museums, science centers, and art museums. Pre-, and hopefully soon post-COVID, members convene three times a year in a chosen city where for three days they discuss topics central to effectively running a museum: leadership, management, governance, strategy and fundraising. Between meetings, groups meet virtually for updates on progress, friendly accountability check-ins, and problem-solving. Additionally, members commonly email their group with help for solving prickly issues.

For more than twenty years, this fee-based professional development group has been a model of supporting leaders as they navigate the ups and downs of the nonprofit world of children’s museums. In this past COVID year, Roundtable methods, resources, and open communications offered another lifeline to member museum directors as they wrestled with unprecedented challenges.

MAH: The Durels began Museum Roundtable groups in 1999. You joined as a museum director in 2006, and became the facilitator in 2018. What perspective do you bring to today’s Roundtable groups?

MAC: The Durels are a tough act to follow, but I bring a slightly different perspective. John was far more knowledgeable than I in the technical side of museums such as collections management, curation, and programming; Anita was very focused on fundraising. I’m a big proponent of what writer Patrick Lencioni, author of The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, calls “team health.” He cites a difference between a “smart” organization and a “healthy” one. Smart organizations work on strategy, marketing, finance, technology. “Healthy” organizations do all of that and create an employee experience that minimizes politics and confusion and maximizes morale and productivity, leading to less staff turnover. Team health can and should be applied to boards as well.

MAH: Were there differences in what museum leaders needed from a professional development group twenty years ago and what they need today?

MAC: I look at what’s the same as opposed to what’s different. But there are obvious external changes, like the growth of the internet. In the late 2000s at the children’s museum, we kept our wi-fi password a secret. We didn’t allow visitors network access because we wanted them to spend time with their kids with no distractions. That’s much less common these days.

There has been a lot of research in the past ten years on the “softer side” of organizational management. We know so much more about how brains work, how adults can reprogram their own neural networks and learn new things. Leaders can learn to change and modify the way they run their organizations creating a great environment in which staff can do great work.

MAC: Back in the ’90s, when I was in business school, business management was all about hard metrics, like the cost of materials and cash turnover. Employee engagement and job satisfaction, once viewed as “soft” measurements, are taken much more seriously now because we realize they actually matter a great deal.

For instance, to be successful, employees need to know their work has purpose, be able to measure whether or not they’re
doing good work, and have autonomy over some part of the work. Purpose is easy. If you work in a children’s museum and you can’t get a sense of what the organization is trying to accomplish or how you’re contributing to a better world, then you’re probably in the wrong spot. Measurement is a little more difficult. For example, how do you know you’re doing a good job as a floor staff person? Is it keeping the museum exhibits clean? Interacting with guests? Facilitating play? Museum leaders have to define what constitutes a good job, and once an employee is clear on this, they should be given some autonomy to do it.

MAHER: When the Roundtables started, what needs were they fulfilling among members of the groups?

MACFEE: Museum leaders were looking for somebody who could appreciate the nuances of serving as a director of a nonprofit organization. They wanted a sounding board to talk about things like board issues or creating an environment where staff can be successful.

MAHER: What are today’s Roundtable groups like?

MACFEE: We purposely gather a broad cross-section of museums. Groups evolve. New people come in all the time, while some of the longest members have been in for over ten years. Some decide it isn’t for them and move on. The first Roundtable member was Julia Bland, executive director of the Louisiana Children’s Museum, and she remained a member for nineteen years.

MAHER: How do the Roundtable groups decide what to talk about? Is there a curriculum or a content plan?

MACFEE: We generally focus our discussions on the five critical competencies of a chief executive, which are: 1) good governance (everything about working with a board); 2) staff (organizational culture and engagement); 3) fundraising (a big focus for most museums); 4) community leadership (institutional visibility in the community); and recently, 5) DEAI (diversity, equity, access, inclusion). In addition, members suggest topics or things just come up at the meetings that members would like to talk or learn more about. So, between meetings I locate resources or prepare presentations to be on the agenda next time. Discussions are responsive to what the members say they need.

No topic is off limits. For example, one of the things people are talking about now is how to deal with burnout. People have been really stressed and challenged to keep things together, and now they need a respite in order to recover. But now, museums are reopening and trying to get back to normal, which requires fresh stores of energy. So, we’re talking about how to maintain energy and enthusiasm among an already burnt out staff.

MAHER: Do members bring nuts-and-bolts issues or thorny problems to hash out with the group?

MACFEE: Yes, the prepared topics mentioned above probably take up about two-thirds of the time at an in-person retreat. Then we reserve time for troubleshooting. You give people time in the hot seat where they say, “This is my challenge.” Then the group addresses it and gives them ideas for moving forward. The Roundtable meeting framework has been in place for more than twenty years, but once the pandemic hit, we devoted almost all of our time to rapid-response troubleshooting. Now, as we’re slowly re-emerging in 2021, there’s less attention on urgent problems and a return to thinking in bigger terms about ongoing professional development.

MAHER: Museum directors’ primary focus is usually on how to make their museums succeed. How much do museum leaders feel comfortable sharing and how much do they hold back? How do you deal with collaboration vs. competition among group members?

MACFEE: One difference between the Roundtable model and the other affinity groups discussed in this issue of Hand to Hand is how we bring new members into the group. When someone expresses an interest in joining, we look at the possibility of their museum being in competition with other group members. For example, including directors from two different art museums in the same city would not produce the optimal group mix. Competition for audience share or fundraising is not as big a concern as competition for board members, which can be fierce. The short list of people within a particular geographic region who make ideal board members often means that multiple organizations are competing for the same people. But once Roundtable groups are formed, trust takes over and there’s no holding back. We don’t aim to be matchmakers, but if collaborations emerge, that is frosting on the cake.

MAHER: How do people join a Roundtable?

MACFEE: They come through referrals from other members. This isn’t by design, we’re not trying to be exclusive, but broad-based, outbound marketing has not been effective at getting new members. It’s partly the nature of the business: people don’t usually reach out until something is wrong. Referrals come after somebody calls somebody they know for help. Maybe they remember a session presenter from InterActivity or recall a colleague’s story of how someone in the field helped them with a particular problem. So, they give them a call. And if this person has been a Roundtable member, during the course of the conversation, they might say, “Well, this is exactly the kind of thing I would take to my Roundtable.” And the caller’s response? “What’s a Roundtable?” That’s how new members come in. We want fresh thinking and new perspectives, but we haven’t had any luck inviting people who don’t have any connection to someone in the group who is known and trusted.

MAHER: Once someone has expressed interest in joining, what characteristics do you look for in assembling a compatible and productive group?

MACFEE: First, I get to know them through several in-depth phone calls. The first call is informational—what is the Roundtable and how does it work? After they’ve had a chance to think it over, the next call covers any questions and then confirms that we have a spot if they want to join. The third is an orientation call which focuses on the Roundtable’s core values, which are 1) listen to understand not to respond; 2) commit to growth, particularly uncomfortable growth; 3) engage in healthy conflict; and 4) full participation.

Listening is harder than it sounds. Directors are problem solvers, and sometimes jump in before they fully understand the issue. Growth is about stretching and challenging yourself. If you’re doing it right, you should feel uncomfortable. Healthy conflict takes place when somebody says something another member doesn’t agree with. Robust discussion and different points of view are encouraged, but we don’t want destructive conflict. Finally, if you come to a retreat and
spend the whole time on your phone, that’s not helpful to anybody. Meetings are actively facilitated; everybody gets equal airtime. Nobody dominates the conversation, but nobody’s hiding in the corner either. This process helps establish trust.

MAHER: Successful affinity groups trust each other, and are not afraid to bring up any topic. What inhibits trust-building in a group?

MACFEE: People who would rather give all the advice and are not willing to hear or take any. Also people who aren’t willing to be open enough to share the real issues they face.

MAHER: Leaders are used to leading. People look to them for direction and answers. This role reversal must be hard for some people.

MACFEE: Yes, and some people never can get there. As an active facilitator, I try to balance answer-giving with answer-getting. Being unable to make this switch isn’t a bad thing—the Roundtable just might not be a good fit for them.

Every in-person retreat begins with what we call the Opening Ceremony where we re-

visit the core values of the group, and then participate in a sharing experience. It helps members shift out of “I have all the answers” mode into “I’d rather have people question my answers than answer my questions” Roundtable mode.

MAHER: In an earlier email, you described the health and vitality of a group in general as depending on a good balance of “advice givers and advice takers.”

On January 26, 2020, a Museum Roundtable group socializes at the Topside restaurant in Baltimore. Left to right: Jeff Murray, Calvert County Marine Museum; Chris Shires, Gilmore Car Museum; Hillary Olson, Rochester Museum & Science Center; Mark Heppner, Ford House; Melanie Adams, Anacostia Community Museum; Kyle McKoy, Mercer Museum and Fonthill Castle; Joan Mumert, York County History Center; Anita Durel, Durel Consulting Partners (retired); John Durel, Durel Consulting Partners (retired); Ann Ramsden, Arts & Heritage Foundation of St. Albert; David Simmons, Billings Farm & Museum; Rebecca Massie Lane, Washington County Museum of Fine Arts.

MACFEE: People do things when they have an incentive. Somebody who wants advice or feels like they need help might have the incentive to start a group because they need a sounding board. Conversely, someone in the twilight of their career, who wants to give back, might be incentivized to keep a group together. Post-COVID will all these local/regional affinity groups stay together? Some will. As long as somebody has a strong incentive to keep a group together, they will do their best to make it happen. But if that incentive is weakened or lost, then groups kind of drift apart. People get busy with other things.

MACFEE: When we’re in the nuts-and-bolts, problem-solving mode, the Roundtable group looks a lot like these other groups. Both models promote camaraderie and many result in the formation of deep friendships among members of the group.

But the fee and time commitment require me as a facilitator to elevate the Roundtable to another level. When I’m not actually engaged with my groups, I’m preparing for the next meeting, developing the curriculum and study guides so that when we all get together they will feel like it’s time and money well spent. With more informally organized affinity groups, attendance is less consistent. If nobody has any big questions or has prepared anything, it might not be the most productive session. Many people like that informality. Roundtable members do tell me they appreciate not having to plan anything. They don’t want one more thing to be in charge of.

The other big difference is that the Roundtables monitor accountability. Meetings are not episodic reports of issues, problems, solutions, and next time new problems, new solutions. We ask members to update us on progress made over the long term, because we’re interested in growth and solving the most challenging issues once and for all. We close each retreat by saying, “What are the two things that you absolutely want to make progress on before we gather together next time?” I write their responses down and email them to members afterwards. We start the next retreat with that list and the opening question is, “How did you do with ‘x’? Did you make progress?” If their answer is vague or evasive, I might say, “Okay, that was a nice bluff. Now tell us the real truth.” Sometimes it can be hard to get back into “Roundtable mode.”

And sometimes there is hesitancy admitting they didn’t make progress. We want to tackle hard issues, so there isn’t any shame in it. But we can’t support a member if we don’t know what’s actually going on.

MACFEE: In every local/regional group virtual meeting I attended, someone brought up a very specific problem. In about ten minutes, five or six directors just troubleshooted, came up with solutions the person was happy about, and they moved on to the next problem. I was
amazed but also thought, “How did these directors solve problems quickly before COVID spawned regular group calls?”

MACFEE: How did people get advice like this in the past? Mentors. You invited an experienced director for coffee and picked their brain. Then if a cordial relationship emerged and later a crisis comes up, you could pick up the phone and ask them for specific advice. When I was the director of what was then considered a moderate-sized children’s museum (annual budget $1.5M), the people from smaller museums would ask me for advice. I, in turn, would seek advice from bigger museums. It’s like an ongoing food chain.

Also let’s not lose sight of the fact that before the pandemic, museum directors had fewer problems to solve. Life wasn’t perfect, of course, but compared to the past eighteen months, the wind was at their backs, the economy was good, donors were out there, and people were visiting and joining as members.

When the pandemic started, everybody suddenly had a lot of problems, some they had never even imagined before. So, they needed the active support of their peers to get through it. For our groups it was no different, but at the beginning of this year we started to see the light at the end of the tunnel. As museums reopened, directors’ interest shifted back toward longer-term thinking and organizational development.

MAHER: Do you think that what museum leaders have experienced in these stormy last eighteen months will fundamentally change the way they work together going forward?

MACFEE: My short-term prediction is we will return to the pre-pandemic way of doing things as much and as quickly as we can. However, the foundation has been laid for major changes over the coming decade. Now that we know that we can work from anywhere, so you’re no longer limited to the talent which lives close to you. Museum leaders already know the model of fractional work by hiring consultants for short duration specialized work. Where else can you deploy that model in your workforce?

MAHER: Among new people joining the Roundtables, do you see any changes in what they’re looking for in a support network now?

MACFEE: We actually brought on a couple new people during the pandemic. Judging by them, the focus for leaders remains the same: long-term organization development, good board relationships, good governance principles, strategic planning, working your plan, and building team health.

MAHER: Other affinity groups are wondering if their group should expand, what it would take to do that, and if there are trade-offs?

MACFEE: Expanding groups can be challenging. Even though the Roundtables grow by referral, I’m very structured and mindful of providing a proper orientation before the member attends their first meeting. This is as much to help them get the most out of it as it is to preserve the experience of the existing members. Everyone benefits from more brains at the table, but not if a new member is actively disrupting the culture we’ve established, even if inadvertently.

Even with all of this, I think the most effective groups should be capped at a dozen members. Google’s research about effective teams has shown that one key component is everyone has to have a chance to talk at each meeting. If you get too many people in the room, you run out of time pretty quickly for equal sharing.

MAHER: Before COVID—and perhaps again soon—many of these local/regional groups took field trips to each other’s museums. They supported each other professionally, but a real camaraderie developed through socializing. During the pandemic, maintaining virtual social contact with other people was a lifeline. What is the role of socializing in professional development networks?

MACFEE: Socializing is very important because that’s where you build trust. Pre-COVID, our groups work during the day and go to dinner together in the evening. Evening dinners are entirely social time—no work chatter—we talk about families and general interests. The more you know somebody, the more willing you are to share and bond as a group. During the pandemic Zoom calls, we were primarily business-focused and the group started to suffer a little bit. So, following an afternoon of professional development on Zoom, we adjourned and met up again at 7:00 p.m., uncorked some wine I had shipped to each of them ahead of time—and socialized. We were surprised at how much we needed that.

MAHER: What have you learned about people in your work with small groups?

MACFEE: People and organizations are much more alike than they are different. The same scenarios come up over and over, and everybody thinks that they’re the only one who has this challenge—particularly with governance. Having a board that understands what it is supposed to do, doesn’t micromanage or get “into the weeds,” and stays focused on the big picture is a common aspiration. Everybody feels like their board is the only one struggling with this, but I can tell you that most boards struggle with this.

Another learning is that inertia is strong. Someone once said that change only happens when the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of changing. People will come to the Roundtable retreats with a problem. They want a plan for change. So, we give them suggestions to take back home but when they get there something else takes center stage and the plan gets tucked away. But it’s only a matter of time until the problem resurfaces, and when it does, it’s usually worse. At that point they really have to exert the effort and the resources to make the change.

Lastly, we all have pride. We don’t want to tell people what we struggle with the most. Museum directors sitting at their desks dealing with museum issues can get insular and myopic. But when they join a group, whether it’s a committed professional development, fee-based one or the many informal affinity groups that have sprung up all over the world, and build up trust, professional and personal breakthroughs can happen.
As we enter into what we all hope are the later stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, I find myself looking back on the past fifteen months and thinking about lessons learned. Chief amongst those is my gratitude for the support we have given and received throughout the museum field — so many calls and so much information sharing! But also, as I think about how we’ve navigated the pandemic, I realize how much we’ve all needed to form new partnerships, ways of working, and transient networks to navigate all of the various pitfalls that have presented themselves over the year. Below are just a few networks that have been important to us here at the Scott Family Amazeum in Northwest Arkansas.

Deciding to Close

In the earliest days of the pandemic, so much of our work was driven by a lack of cohesive information or guidelines coming from the national public infrastructure. There was a lot we didn’t know about how to deal with COVID, and even more we didn’t know we didn’t know. In the absence of timely and consistent guidance from our civic sector, we found what we needed from our colleagues in the business community. With world-wide facilities, as business leaders prepared for what they needed to do for their businesses, they consulted world-class experts. Being able to tap into that expertise and foresight was crucial for the nonprofit community. On March 13, many Arkansas cultural institutions, in consultation with each other, decided to close to public visitation. A statewide mandate followed a couple of weeks later.

Thinking Together

During the pandemic, an existing, informal information- and expertise-sharing structure has been a key anchor for us in new ways. Every Monday morning, a cross-section group of community leaders in the Bentonville, Arkansas, area meets to share what is happening in their particular sectors. This group includes the mayor, the county judge, the school superintendent, representatives from the visitor and convention bureau, Chamber of Commerce, downtown association, the largest local philanthropic foundation, our largest local employer, and the three larger cultural attractions in the city. The goal of these loosely structured meetings is to make sure each of us understands what everyone else is doing at any given time with our agencies and organizations. During the pandemic, the meetings became a critical communication pathway and tool for collective problem-solving. I don’t know how we could have survived without the chance to do regular scans across the different community sectors to put together so many pieces of a jigsaw puzzle when we didn’t even know what the final picture would look like.

As an example, the superintendent of the local school system needed to understand where the world of kids and families intersected with that of public health as the schools were placed under state emergency directives to offer an in-person schooling option by the fall of 2020. With much of the community still in lockdown, the school district was developing policies and making their meetings and minutes available via video conference. Being able to tap into their deliberations and assembled expertise provided the basis for many of our own decisions about our reopening plans. We were able to refine these plans in consultation with one of the school committee leaders, as well as three respected local physicians. Interestingly enough, when looking for guidance on safety, the head of Bentonville’s Parks and Recreation Department became a key sounding board. In some ways, the Community Center they operate was one of the closest analogs to the interactive, hands-on environment of the museum in the region. Many other cultural institutions in the area are object- or performance-based, with different audiences and a very different style of interaction. As part of the city government, Parks & Rec had a close association with the Health Department. We learned what kinds of recommendations were being made, and what safety measures they determined were acceptable in a hands-on, activity-rich environment. I frequently spoke with the director as we navigated our decision-making, particularly in the first three months of the pandemic.

In the absence of timely and consistent guidance from our civic sector, we found what we needed from our colleagues in the business community. With world-wide facilities, as business leaders prepared for what they needed to do for their businesses, they consulted world-class experts. Being able to tap into that expertise and foresight was crucial for the nonprofit community.
Pandemic Bartering and Support Systems

In the first months of the pandemic, procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE) and the materials needed to clean and sanitize our building was such a challenge that a strange new market for goods and supplies emerged. Some days the scene felt straight out of a back streets movie script. In one example, the head of the local Boys and Girls Club was able to procure a large quantity of disposable masks from a board member who was able to tap into his overseas factory chain to get a direct plane shipment. Fortunately, he was willing to share the masks with community organizations like ours. The larger regional chamber of commerce was able to secure a truckload of hand sanitizer, and hosted a pop-up sale to help distribute it to local businesses over a weekend. Distilleries, unable to entertain whiskey-loving visitors, used their equipment to create sanitizer to help make ends meet, while meeting the incredible demand for a scarce product. I can’t say how many conversations I had with people that started with, “So where are you on hand sanitizer?”

Existing cracks in local social services programs became even more pronounced, and new partnerships formed help fill widening gaps. With schools and other community children’s gathering centers closed, getting foods to families in critical need was a challenge. So a neighboring museum, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, put a team to work creating meal packs for thousands of families and organizations like ours created learning components to go into each box. Inspired by that work, Amazeum worked with a local food vendor and secured additional funding to continue providing food for a few thousand more families.

Finally, knowing the creative community was one of the hardest hit, the museum sponsored Lunch Tunes, hiring musicians to livestream over a series of lunch hours, providing paying gigs for musicians and opportunities for our team and the community to come together over lunch and listen to a little local music, even while remaining apart in their homes and offices.

Advocacy and Relief Systems

With so many different needs to attend to in the museum, and decisions happening so quickly in the state house with regard to relief efforts, it proved challenging to be present on the state level to help committees understand the situation of cultural institutions like ours. Visit Bentonville, our Visitor and Convention Bureau, became one of the most vocal advocates for Amazeum down in the capital. It was critically important for the museum to be seen not just as a place to visit, but as a small business and economic generator for the community. With strong voices from the tourism advocacy groups leading the way, private, nonprofit museums became incorporated into key relief opportunities that helped pave the way for our sustainability, along with that of many others.

Later Stages

As we shift into this later stage of the pandemic, I see us reactivating some of these early connections to understand how we open up more fully, transitioning from some of our current, self-imposed restrictions, such as capacity limits and masking policies. What are the right next steps? What is being done around vaccination policy? How can relatively vague guidance from public health be shaped into safe workplace policy? Working to create consistent responses for our team, our audience, our business colleagues, and our community is an important step to help bring our organizations and region along with us during the recovery—and we have a long way yet to go. Moving forward, we hope to retain some of these transient, cross-sector network connections to keep building on—both for our everyday work, and to lay a more robust foundation ready to respond to future unknowns.

Most importantly, I am so grateful for the collective mindshare that was offered over the last fifteen months. More so than any other time, certainly in my career, it took a hive mind to create the timely solutions and support to get to where we are now. Thank you all—we are so grateful you synapsed with us!

Sam Dean is the founding executive director of the Scott Family Amazeum in Bentonville, Arkansas, where he has served for almost nine years.

The Scott Family Amazeum is located in Bentonville, Arkansas, nestled in the Northwest Arkansas region, a multi-nodal area of 535,000 people anchored by five medium-sized cities. Home to two Fortune 500 companies, one Fortune 1 company, and the largest campus of the state university system, the area has been on a rapid growth curve over the past twenty years.
NWAYM Loses One of Its Own: Portland Children’s Museum

NWAYM members supported staff and community members of the Portland Children’s Museum (PCM) when its board announced a sudden and permanent closure earlier this year. Front desk staff at children’s museums from Eugene, Oregon, to Burlington, Washington, got many questions from visitors. What happened, and would their own local children’s museum be in danger of closing, too? The group discussed ways in which it could welcome members from the now-defunct museum, or at least communicate with PCM members to let them know that their reciprocal admission coupons would still be honored. Board members noticed as well, and worked with staff to understand and steer their museums clear of the dangers Portland had faced. Among NWAYM directors, a sense of grief and mourning ensued, as the doors closed on an important and influential museum that brought innovation and thoughtful leadership to the field for seventy-five years.

NWAYM Members Speak

In our smaller, rural area, we don’t have a local museum community to share experiences or exchange ideas. Having the NWAYM group as a resource, not just for myself but for our entire team, has been a tremendous benefit for our organization. It’s built our enthusiasm for our industry, and given us a true sense of community. And it has consistently reminded us that we really belong to something so much bigger.

—Sunny Spicer, Executive Director, Children’s Museum of Southern Oregon (formerly Kid Time Children’s Museum)

The most valuable benefit of participation in NWAYM is the collaboration, rather than competition, among member museums.

When I mentioned during a call that our newly opened museum would welcome exhibits that were no longer being used, we received donations from three museums in the region. One set of exhibits had already been adopted once before—they traveled from KidsQuest to Skagit County several years ago, and are now installed in Boise! These exhibits have a new life, rather than being in storage, and we are so happy to have them.

—Pat Baker, Executive Director and Founder, Children’s Museum of Idaho

Our board of directors regularly asks me to check in with my colleagues at NWAYM to see what other museums are doing as we navigate complex situations. Knowing first-hand how other museums in the region approach challenges gives us all the confidence to move forward with our plans. This was particularly important when we contemplated re-opening during the pandemic, and when we tried out timed ticketing. But it has also helped us think about developing benefits packages for staff, and other operational questions. The collective wisdom is invaluable.

—Meredith Maple-Gitter, Executive Director, Fairbanks Children’s Museum

Northwest Association of Youth Museums continued from page 2

2020 Hit Hard

Across the country and around the world, the last eighteen months have presented a whole new set of challenges for everyone, including NWAYM members. The health concerns of the pandemic, the turmoil of the election and its aftermath, the heightened understanding of anti-racism and social justice practices, and the various economic crises resulting from shutdowns created unprecedented conditions for children’s museums. Throughout the Pacific Northwest region, museums closed to visi-
tors, re-opened, and in some cases re-closed and re-opened again. Sadly, the Portland Children’s Museum, established more than seventy-five years ago, closed permanently. Significant projects were put on hold, while some capital campaigns emerged at full strength. Fundraisers were canceled, restructured, or moved online.

Through all this, NWAYM museums’ staff have continued to serve their communities in myriad ways—through online programming, kits, videos, and remote lessons, as well as diaper banks, food drives, internet hot spots, outdoor play spaces, and activities for kids at vaccination sites. They also worked diligently to create safe, clean, uncrowded spaces in their museums once visitors were welcomed back.

In April of 2020, NWAYM directors canceled their annual fall in-person gathering and began meeting on bi-weekly video conferences. At first, these calls were a place to commiserate and compare notes, but they soon became a crucial lifeline for rebuilding, recovery, and reality checks. NWAYM directors also attended weekly ACM Leadership Calls, and applied the information they gathered to their states, counties, and cities. When funding options varied from state to state and county to county, bookkeepers and CFOs compared notes. And while COVID regulations varied widely with the region, staff members shared information about PPE, PPP, COVID testing, and operating protocols. They offered each other moral support and practical coaching, with directors hearing each other’s concerns and asking, again and again, “How can we help?” The spirit of collaboration that had been nurtured over thirty-two years became a reliable and steadfast source of true cooperation. In a very real way, this association, which was already a helpful resource, saw its own transition from nice to necessary.

A Rising Tide

Several NWAYM museum directors have noted that the individual success of each museum improves the outcomes for all the museums: if they focused on competing with each other—for audience share, funding, board members, media attention or political visibility—they may miss opportunities to grow together and become stronger as a group. To their minds, it is in everyone’s best interest for children’s museums throughout the region to thrive, and to be seen as essential, valuable, and important parts of families’ daily lives.

The NWAYM-associated museums have shared members and visitors, as well as staff. Several museums are close enough for families to easily visit and maintain multiple memberships, and as staff moves around the region, they have found positions at sibling organizations. In general, NWAYM museums take a pragmatic approach: it is challenging for families with young children to drive more than forty-five minutes to visit a museum, and there is sufficient audience in each travel catchment area to support each city or region’s children’s museum.

While direct participation levels have varied over time, it has become more and more clear that the advantages of collaboration outweigh the temptation to compete. The region’s kids, families, educators, and communities are all better for it.

Alissa Rupp, FAIA, LEED, is Principal, FRAME / Integrative Design Strategies. She is currently serving as acting director of the Seattle Children’s Museum as they move to their next stage.

ADVANTAGES, COLLABORATIONS AND COOPERATIVE PROGRAMS: WHAT MAKES NWAYM SO GREAT? (And how could your local/regional network grow its reach?)

The museums in NWAYM have found many creative ways to leverage their alliance.

• Reciprocal admission discount: As a benefit of membership, NWAYM museums provide a 25 percent discount on admission for up to four visitors for members of participating museums. This encourages people to expand their children’s museum horizons, and to travel to their “next nearest” museums with their friends and families.

• Regional conference: While it can be cost-prohibitive to send more than a few staff members to InterActivity, most museums can send larger contingents to a two-day event nearby. Staff members get to know their colleagues in similar roles, and enjoy the professional development opportunities.

• Big ideas: In recent years, the organizing museum has been encouraged to invite local business, civic, and cultural leaders to provide a “keynote” for the conference, bringing some bigger ideas and expansive thinking to the event.

• Collaborative funding opportunities: Several of the museums have teamed up to develop funding opportunities or to jointly pursue specific strategies.

• Exhibit exchanging and re-housing: Several exhibits have been sold or donated to other NWAYM museums. Much-loved exhibits that are well-built can be refreshed and given a new life in a new community once the museum of origin goes in a different direction.

• Staff knowledge: When staff members have visited other museums in the region, they recommend other museums that might be a good fit for local members, or traveling visitors. The Pacific Northwest experiences a significant amount of regional tourism, so it is great for all of the museums when informed staff can welcome visitors from other places and make them feel at home. Visitors and staff alike have a sense that they are part of a bigger community, and that children’s museums are valuable additions everywhere.

• Automatic colleagues: NWAYM fosters an affinity that ACM supports, reinforcing the existence of a thriving children’s museum field, and that important things are happening at every institution.
Regardless of the outcome, those two whirlwind days in March 2021 have forged an alliance among our state’s children’s museums that did not exist before. Since then, we’ve been texting each other about grant opportunities, exhibit problems, and cheering each other on as we stretched to tell our story and make our ask. We may not get the stimulus funds we asked for, but I’m convinced that we have made our case and that Connecticut’s children’s museums will be seen in a new light because of our outreach.

Guerilla Networking

continued from page 3

on those screens. “Let me try,” I said. “Great,” he said. “Get back to me by Friday with your ask.”

Over the next forty-eight hours, I was able to reach all the other children’s museum directors in the state. They told me how they were holding their organizations together, how they had made the decision to stay open or closed to visitors, and what it would mean if they had an infusion of funding. A couple of these conversations took place while directors were simultaneously running their museum’s front desk. One museum was on the verge of closing for good and jumped at the hope of using funds to build an outdoor experience to keep visitors coming safely. Others wrestled with the reality that having an in-museum preschool meant they couldn’t open their exhibits to the public at all, because of COVID restrictions. (The state’s office of early childhood wouldn’t even let the parents accompany their preschoolers into buildings, much less the visiting public into exhibits.) I heard about the deficits created by reduced attendance and higher operating costs, and capital projects delayed while raising everyday operating funds. And they listened to my particular woes: our museum needed funding to retain our exhibit artists, as we tried to make the best use of this shutdown time.

By the time I had finished all those calls and emails, I had the answer to my state senator’s question: there are nine children’s museums in Connecticut, and in 2019, we had 625,000 in-house visits at our museums. We were all eager to make this state funding request. We knew that without a direct, line-item ask, we would face the same old scrum of competing within the tourism/hospitality sector on one end, or against other education and arts organizations on the other. To date, we hadn’t fared well in those battles; a direct ask represented a breakthrough. But was it a pipe dream?

But What Should We Ask For?

The first challenge was to figure out a fair and defensible request. I collected bits of data, thinking maybe the answer was there.

How much PPP did each of us get? Maybe we should ask for two or three times that amount? Or maybe we should follow the federal SVOG formula, which determined grant amounts based on earned income?

The problem was, it’s hard to get an apples-to-apples comparison between any two children’s museums, much less an accurate picture of the whole group. In terms of annual attendance, the Connecticut museums range from 5,000 to 277,000 visits (Kidcity clocks in at 112,000). Four of the nine museums have preschools, two take care of animals, and one is aligned with a university. Since COVID started—and as of this writing—five of the museums had opened to limited numbers of visitors and four were still closed to the public, without an opening day in sight. My museum, Kidcity, is perhaps the oddest of the oddballs. We usually fund our operations and our exhibits from earned income, and haven’t tried to raise money since our early years…until now.

Eventually, it was clear that there was at least one thing we all had in common: a building which was closed or at reduced capacity, limiting our ability to earn income to sustain our museums.

Ultimately, we based our request on a formula of $4 per in-house visit from 2019. For each of the nine museums, that would be a truly significant grant, and in our case, similar to the size of an unattainable SVOG award. Together, the Connecticut children’s museums’ request added up to a $2.5 million—a small number compared to the federal aid the state was receiving, yet more than we were likely to receive in competitive grants from state agencies.

The Seed is Planted, But You Have to Water It

The next hurdle was advocacy. My state senator, as a member of the Appropriations Committee, pushed to include our request in the spending bill for the American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds, but we didn’t stop there. In a stroke of luck, one of our Connecticut children’s museum directors is also an elected state representative for her town. She gave us all a crash course in how the legislative process works in our state. Directors from each of the nine museums contacted their own elected state officials—and anyone else they thought could help. A few have become real champions of our ask.

This episode ends with a cliffhanger. Months later, we still don’t know if our effort will succeed. Even if we make it through appropriations, there are negotiations yet to come with the governor’s spending priorities. Our request could wind up on the cutting room floor, not from callousness on the part of Connecticut leaders, but just because obtaining money from the state is a complicated, multi-tiered process. (Note to Self: In the next pandemic, hire a lobbyist!)

Regardless of the outcome, those two whirlwind days in March 2021 have forged an alliance among our state’s children’s museums that did not exist before. Since then, we’ve been texting each other about grant opportunities, exhibit problems, and cheering each other on as we stretched to tell our story and make our ask. We may not get the stimulus funds we asked for, but I’m convinced that Connecticut’s children’s museums will be seen in a new light because of our outreach.

There are lots of things from these months of pandemic that I’ll be happy to leave behind, and it’s even possible that someday, I won’t need the weekly ACM Leadership Call just to stay afloat. But Connecticut is known as the “Land of Steady Habits,” and now that we’ve started, I’m hoping we’ll keep the relationships among all levels of staff in our museums, even after these strange, strange times are in the past.

Jen Alexander is the founder and has served as the executive & creative director of Kidcity Children’s Museums for that past twenty-six years.

Editor’s Note:
In mid-June, the Connecticut museums learned that their $2.5 million request was approved and doubled by the legislature, and they will receive the full grant for two consecutive years.
When hearing the name of our state, Wisconsin, non-residents typically associate our culture with beer and cheese. Yes, Wisconsin leads the nation in cheese production and often ranks at or near the top in per capita rankings for beer consumption. Wisconsin also ranks first nationally in the production of horseradish, ginseng, and cranberries and is known for producing butter, bratwursts, and corn. Wisconsin also leads the nation in something else: it has the most children’s museums per capita in the United States. Basically, you could say folks from Wisconsin live in a state of PLAY.

Children’s museums in Wisconsin have long been engaged in collaborative efforts. An annual gathering, which began in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, in 2009, has traveled the state ever since, increasing in participation and frequency. At these events, children’s museum professionals discuss thought-provoking ideas and share each other’s best practices. This collaboration, known as Wisconsin Children’s Museums (WICM) has resulted in greater quality for exhibits and programs and nearly doubled children’s museum traffic from just over 500,000 (2009) to nearly 1 million (2019). To assist in navigating the pandemic, WICM held virtual meetings almost weekly. Discussions concentrated on uncovering critical and necessary funding sources and sharing best practices around reopening.

In November 2020, after working together to research state funding opportunities, more than a dozen children’s museums shared a combined total of $650,000 in COVID relief funding from the Wisconsin Department of Administration. This modest portion of statewide funding, available to all arts and cultural organizations, helped some children’s museums in the state, but more support is needed. Recently, members of the group again put their heads together to create messages for their county executives, mayors/city managers, etc. A powerful letter, signed by the group, details how children’s museums play an essential role in healthy, thriving communities and asks for their support in allocating American Rescue Plan funds to keep museums alive. It is hoped that these latest joint communication efforts will lead to additional opportunities for Wisconsin children’s museums to collectively advance goals of the Department of Children and Families and Department of Education, as well as provide critical support for our community’s children as they are healing from the effects of the pandemic.

What started as a group meeting periodically to share best practices has evolved into a collaborative that meets bi-weekly to coordinate and discuss museum issues and trends. Our first statewide project in 2018 implemented the national initiative Prescription for Play (RX4P) through a state media campaign in cooperation with medical institutions and pediatricians.

Wisconsin children’s museums demonstrated how effective the statewide partnership can be in this campaign, which highlighted information released by the American Academy of Pediatrics about the importance of play to a child’s health and development. A plan created collaboratively by the Fond du Lac and Madison Children’s Museums was endorsed and supported by all thirteen children’s museums in the state. On a single day, the campaign reached more than 100,000 people through social media posts alone. In addition, approximately two dozen healthcare entities and local radio and television outlets joined forces to shed light on a topic that directly impacts social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development of children.

Collaborating with colleagues from around the state allowed us to effectively and creatively develop a unique Wisconsin Prescription for Play logo and press release that each museum could customize, resulting in sweatshirts, stickers, signage, and opportunities to incorporate expertise from physicians in our own communities. Working smarter, not harder, we reached more people in a more impactful way. These efforts were acknowledged by the Association of Children’s Museums, who invited us to present the results of our awareness campaign in a national webinar.

—Andrea Welsch, Children’s Museum of Fond du Lac

Wisconsin Children’s Museums have moved from intermittent to consistent advocacy of play, starting through relationship building at our annual Children’s Museum Day at the Capitol. This became the foundation for realizing outcomes for positioning children’s museums as major partners of state government. In January 2019, Madison Children’s Museum hosted the Governor Evers’ Madison Kid’s Gala, and Michael McHorney was appointed by Governor Evers to the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board. In 2020, all children’s museums were successful in receiving COVID funding relief. These three examples were direct results of that initial relationship building.

Governor Evers leveraged our audience reach when he hosted three Inaugural Kid’s Galas across the state, in children’s sites, two of them children’s museums. In Madison, he funded a free Saturday at the museum, but he won us over when he continues on page 15
Community Education Network Supports Children and Institutions during the Pandemic

Rachel Carpenter, Children's Discovery Museum; Hannah Johnson & Candace Summers, McLean County Museum of History; Shannon Reedy, Miller Park Zoo; and Dr. Diane Wolf, Bloomington Public Schools District 87

N o one group or organization can do it all. The many organizations within the Bloomington/Normal, Illinois, community that serve the educational needs of children have created multiple and sometimes overlapping support groups. In addition to educators, members include psychologists, food workers, and marketing personnel, but we all work for organizations that are tied to formal or informal education in some way. Sharing a commitment to care for families, these professionals from different nonprofit organizations work together to identify needs and coordinate responses.

During the pandemic, different groups quickly realized that we all needed to maintain consistent and regular communication to meet three distinct levels of need: 1) the needs of children and families, 2) the needs of each organization serving them, and 3) the needs of individual professionals who participated in the meetings. The Central Illinois Community Educators (CICE) stepped up to become a support group and a virtual space where professionals could share ideas and issues among people doing similar work. United Way of McLean County facilitated the formation of even more new groups including one to connect schools, childcare, and youth programming centers. The Children's Discovery Museum participated in both pools regularly; they were very important for the success of the museum during the pandemic.

History of CICE

In 2006, Dr. Diane Wolf of the Regional Office of Education (ROE) 17 wanted to help promote the variety of community resources available to public and private school students in the ROE 17 region. With this goal in mind, Dr. Wolf connected with informal educators and representatives from local institutions including the McLean County Museum of History, Children's Discovery Museum, Livingston County War Museum, David Davis Mansion, Miller Park Zoo, Sugar Grove Nature Center, and others. Over time membership in this coalition of community educators expanded to the Bloomington and Normal public libraries, the Girl Scouts, institutions of higher education, including Illinois State University and Heartland Community College, and arts organizations including the Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts and the McLean County Arts Center. The group primarily included organizations that directly served schools through onsite visits and outreach through off-site programs, loan kits, and other resources.

The group has evolved as more members have joined, but the mission largely remains the same—to inspire and support collaboration among community partners to leverage resources and better serve Central Illinois learners and educators. In the fall of 2017, an effort began to revitalize and, in some ways, reimagine the group's form and function. Continuing to connect with like organizations within Bloomington/Normal, as well as throughout the Central Illinois region, the group was rebranded as the Central Illinois Community Educators (CICE) and effectively relaunched with a meeting of interested organizations in November of that year.

The November 2017 meeting expanded the variety of organizational members to include representatives from all forms of community education from museums, zoos/nature centers, art galleries, and cultural sites, to public libraries, afterschool programs, human service organizations, and more. Today, almost eighty individual educators representing more than fifty local educational institutions are invited to attend quarterly meetings. In addition, they receive regular information about the needs and services of participating organizations and their audiences.

The organizations that have chosen to work together here in Bloomington/Normal could all be considered competitors within a limited market. But we realized that by working together, we can amplify our shared goal of meeting the needs of our community to the best of our ability.

By providing the best programming we can in our areas of expertise, and sharing our successes and failures, we can maximize impact and focus our time in ways we could not as siloed operations.

Since 2017, CICE has utilized its quarterly meetings to collectively explore relevant themes including DEAI, marketing, youth development, behavioral health, census data and the human services sector, community collaboration/partnerships, and pandemic response. Participating organizations rotate host responsibilities. Themes and topics are determined based on the expertise of the host site, as well as the expressed needs and interests of the group. Hannah Johnson, director of youth & family education at the McLean County Museum of History, has facilitated CICE communication and collaboration among group members and host sites since 2017. She continues to aid in the coordination of monthly meetings among core members as an extension of the group’s initial COVID response.

Supporting the Community

When the pandemic began, CICE’s core membership of ten to twelve organizations focused on learning about each member’s capacity and identifying needs present in both our regular audiences and the larger community. Each organization is structured differently and has different sources of funding. Some were protected from many of the effects of public closures while others were not. Some organizations, like the Children’s Discovery Museum, had grant funds that needed to be reallocated appropriately. The museum was also partially supported by the town of Normal.

At each group meeting, held via Zoom beginning in April 2020, discussions focused on the current but quickly changing status of the pandemic, and the ever-evolving information released from the Illinois governor’s office and health department. We discussed the ethics of re-opening to the public and how and when to offer in-person or virtual programs. We talked about how to take programs off-site into both private and public spaces to meet community needs without being too swayed by community “wants” that were not safe for everyone. Balancing the critical need for organizational revenue against the possibility of being a site that could spread the virus was excruciating for all of us. Not everyone on the calls was a decision-maker for their organization, but
we could all share information with those who held those roles.

Shannon Reedy, education specialist from Miller Park Zoo, found our discussions very useful. Even though the zoo wasn’t doing many programs during those first few months of the shut-down, she was inspired by hearing what other organizations were doing. She was eventually charged by zoo management with rolling out virtual programs, along with in-person programs that met COVID mandate standards. This was quite a challenge and required a different way of thinking about their program offerings. She was able to think through new methods, themes, and collaborations based on the stories her colleagues shared.

In our area, schools continued remote learning, but many businesses began to open. The United Way of McLean County recognized a need for childcare and youth programming and brought together organizations that were serving families in this way. Regular meetings of what became the Childcare and Youth Programming Coalition included discussions about issues the schools were seeing. For example, school counselors were particularly helpful in sharing observations on students’ mental health during the shutdown. The coalition also discussed current openings in traditional childcare programs in our area, and relevant program offerings from other informal education institutions. Rachel Carpenter, education manager from the Children’s Discovery Museum, acted as the liaison between the CICE and this new coalition, sharing the availability of all CICE partner organizations’ programming, but also their concerns about new and ongoing community needs and the funding required so that all institutions could continue to operate. As a result of many offshoot meetings, the local YMCA launched all-day programming in closed schools for students whose parents were working. The local school district also created a unique summer program in partnership with other area youth programming organizations.

The release of Cares Act funding to our local school districts enabled the creation of new summer programming. Dr. Diane Wolf, who now works for School District 87, recognized CICE as a resource to help the students in her district, which will host three weeks of summer programming for children in 2021. Diane connected with CICE members and found organizations that could adopt a grade level or group for each afternoon during the program. The Children’s Discovery Museum and the McLean County Museum of History, in conjunction with three other community partner organizations, will bring fun and playful learning experiences to the students.

This arrangement supports the museums as well. For example, as part of the Town of Normal, the Children’s Discovery Museum could not directly access federal funds targeted at learning loss. But the school districts that do are eager to partner with other learning organizations skilled at mitigating primary learning loss. The museum will replace its usual month of summer programs with this new one, guaranteeing the museum’s program income for this period. All organizations are excited to bring their curriculum to students who may not typically be able to access their programming. These enriching learning experiences help build solid educational foundations for children as they return to school this fall.

**Supporting the Organizations**

The organizations that have chosen to work together here in Bloomington/Normal could all be considered competitors within a limited market. But we realized that by working together, we can amplify our shared goal of meeting the needs of our community to the best of our ability. By providing the best programming we can in our areas of expertise, and sharing our successes and failures, we can maximize impact and focus our time in ways we could not as siloed operations. All of our programming overlaps in different ways. Rather than viewing this as a problem, we see it as opportunity to share and better serve children by offering slots in one program when others get full or referring someone to a different program where their needs or interests may be better served. There are never enough resources available to do all the work that needs to be done, but together, we can do more with what we have.

Rachel Carpenter is the Education Manager at the Children’s Discovery Museum (Normal, IL); Hannah Johnson is the Director of Youth and Family Education and Candace Summers is the Director of Community Education at the McLean County Museum of History (Bloomington, IL); Shannon Reedy is the Education Specialist at the Miller Park Zoo (Bloomington, IL); and Dr. Diane Wolf is the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction at Bloomington (IL) Public Schools District 87.

Over the past twenty-five years in the field, I have witnessed children’s museums evolve from “a nice thing to have” to being an important resource, not only to families but also to communities. Some of our largest employers use the museum as a recruiting tool. They bring potential new hires to visit the museum when touring the city. Our statewide network of children’s museums makes the state a great place to work and live.

—Anne Snow, Children’s Museum of La Crosse

The value of a regional or state children’s museum network cannot be over-estimated. Many function as key sounding boards and support groups for museum practitioners scattered around a broad area. They can also harness the expertise and reach of member museums to develop a more powerful collective voice, one that can be harder to escape the notice of local government leaders. There is indeed strength in numbers. State networks like the Wisconsin Children’s Museums are showing the potential of strategic solidarity to support each other and advocate for the children and families in the communities they serve.

Michael McHorney is executive director of the Children’s Museum of Eau Claire, Deb Gilpin is president and CEO of Madison Children’s Museum; Anne Snow is founder and executive director of the Children’s Museum of La Crosse; and Andrea Welsch is the executive director of the Children’s Museum of Fond du Lac. They are all located in Wisconsin.
• What’s the glue that holds you together?

AfricaPlayNetwork:

We share 1) our love for all African children and the potential they represent; 2) our agreement that spaces—and in particular for Amowi, natural spaces—support and facilitate children’s development; 3) play-based, child-centered approaches to learning; 4) a deep and abiding mutual respect for how hard our work is, and 5) a commitment to deep laughter when we are at the point of tears!

The network has been a source of encouragement, support, and strength during tough times. There is a sense of solidarity because we really have nowhere else to look for a better understanding of the contexts we are working in.

NorCal: Camaraderie, shared experiences, these particular women, our need for mutual support through the pandemic, and Zoom technology making it possible.

Louisiana: We bond over the same goal: We want all children to have access to stimulating, hands-on and educational exhibits and programming that promote physical and mental development, curiosity, creativity, and exposes them to local culture.

NCScienceNetwork:

A common purpose: to stimulate interest and excitement in STEM education, helping to promote science literacy throughout the state of North Carolina. Sharing best practices and addressing collective issues is beneficial to all.

Ohio: Mutual respect and having someone to talk to who understands exactly where you are coming from and the challenges you are facing. With only fourteen children’s museums in Ohio, the number of people who understand our plight during the past year is extremely small. Meeting regularly with colleagues has brought a sense of stability and calm to us all.

SmallMuseumCollaborative: Trusting in the friendship and collegiality we have built, we feel safe to be open and honest about our challenges and the issues. This diverse group always offers good suggestions, new tactics, or additional resources to pursue. The fact that we are all smaller museums in a specific region of the country leads to natural commonalities.

Virginia: Similar missions, wanting to learn, connect, and create best practices for post-COVID re-emerging.

• What are you able to accomplish as a group that you might not be able to as individual museums?

AfricaPlayNetwork: Representing a range of African countries, we are working to evolve a continental vision of new frontiers in play and learning which would be much harder to do as individual organizations. We are building a collective and specific expertise to inform and invigorate global exchanges in the world of children’s experiential learning environments.

NorCal: We have shared many resources that no one of us could compile on their
The cohort was organized in April 2020 by Collette Michaud (Children’s Museum of Sonoma County) who reached out to four other museum directors. Meeting primarily on Zoom, it soon evolved through word-of-mouth and mentions on the weekly ACM Leadership Calls.

—Gina Moreland
Habitot Children’s Museum

The group was organized in April 2020 by Julia Bland (Louisiana Children’s Museum) and is currently managed by Arianna Mace (Bayou Country Children’s Museum). All members contribute and actively participate through emails and monthly Zoom calls.

—Arianna Mace
Bayou Country Children’s Museum

**Louisiana Children’s Museums**
Membership open

- Bayou Country Children’s Museum
- Thibodaux
- Children’s Museum of Acadia
- Lafayette
- Children’s Museum of St. Tammany
- Mandeville
- Knock Knock Children’s Museum
- Baton Rouge
- Louisiana Children’s Discovery Center
- Hammond
- Louisiana Children’s Museum
- New Orleans
- Northeast Louisiana Children’s Museum
- Monroe
- The Children’s Museum of Southwest Louisiana
- Lake Charles
- T.R.E.E. House
- Alexandria

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Bayou Country Children’s Museum

**NCScienceNetwork**: We look for opportunities to share exhibit and program resources, which many smaller museums may not have the funding to support. For example, the network offered a small traveling exhibit about Nano science to member institutions at no cost (other than inbound shipping). We are replicating that model with a new exhibit about space science. We continue to seek state funding in one form or another. Our collective voice is much stronger than multiple entreaties by individual members.

**SmallMuseumCollaborative**: Formed a year before the pandemic, we were just beginning to explore ways to partner. In our first year, each executive director would lead a discussion during the monthly call on a chosen topic, such as “fundraising ideas and special events,” “evaluating programs,” or “audience engagement.” Participants knew about the topics in advance and took turns sharing perspectives or strategies and asking questions.

We originally intended to broaden the collaborative to include other museum departments—educators talking to educators, for example—with like departments managing and leading their own group meetings. However, in 2020, the group coalesced around COVID-19. We did not simply commiserate but shared strategies and plans about closing and reopening our museums and keeping our visitors safe. We kept each other up to date about federal relief packages and resources from various museum associations. We often talked about how to help our staff manage stress and visitor interaction.

**Virginia**: This grassroots effort in a time of crisis arose from a need for on-the-ground thinking and support. Similar demographics help us relate easily to each other.

- Competition vs. collaboration among member museums?

**AfricaPlayNetwork**: Based in entirely different countries, with diverse languages and cultures, we are not in competition with one another for audiences or staff. We also tend to get funds from different sources, often with a focus on African development. Our network is characterized by a supportive culture that is not based on a scarcity mindset, but rather trusting that there is an abundance of resources in the world to support our work. We inform one another of funding opportunities and look out for sources that could help the network as a whole.

Every one of our organizations is highly responsive to its own local context. But all of us are creating original programs, projects, exhibits, advocacy campaigns, and media content to champion children and their right to play and learn.

**NorCal**: Competition is not a problem. Our museums are relatively distant from each other and draw from different audiences and funding sources. We have shared exhibits, and even offer reciprocal admission discounts to museums in the group.

**Louisiana**: We are geographically far enough apart that this is not really an issue. We actually want families to museum-hop and visit all of the museums in the state. We do occasionally compete for state-level grant dollars, but not too often.

**NCScienceNetwork**: Generally speaking, geographical distance minimizes direct
**NORTH CAROLINA SCIENCE NETWORK**

**Membership criteria:**
- Designated 501(c)(3) or a governmental agency
- Located in North Carolina with a regional audience and a significant focus on science
- Open to the public for at least two years and operating at least 120 days per year
- Have at least one full-time professional staff

This large group has forty-four members, including:
- Catawba Science Center | Hickory
- Discovery Place Charlotte
- Fascinate–U Children’s Museum | Fayetteville
- Greensboro Children’s Museum
- Hands On! Children’s Museum | Hendersonville
- KidSenses Children’s INTERACTIVE Museum | Wilson
- Kidzu Children’s Museum | Chapel Hill
- Marbles Kids Museum | Raleigh
- North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences | Raleigh
- Port Discover | Elizabeth City
- The Children’s Museum of Wilmington
- Western North Carolina Nature Center | Asheville

In the mid-1980s, eight North Carolina science center directors gathered to discuss issues including the possibility for state funding. In 2000, the group formed the NC Grassroots Science Museums Collaborative, an independent 501(c)(3) organization with advocacy for state funding as a key purpose.

That same year, the collaborative received a $1 million grant from the Burroughs Wellcome Fund to create an endowment, which continues to support it. By the late 2000s, membership had grown to thirty-four institutions. In 2016, the state funding model changed from direct grants to museums to a competitive program based partly on regional economic need. Working in collaboration with the membership to determine the future of the organization, in 2018 it was rechristened as the NC Science Network. The network connects, unifies, strengthens, and champions museums and allied organizations throughout the state to enrich the lives of its citizens by engaging with science.

—J. Willard Whitson, KidSenses Children’s INTERACTIVE Museum

**Ohio:** The issue of competition has not come up. We focus primarily on how to help each other deal with state requirements and how to operate during the pandemic.

**SmallMuseumCollaborative:** It’s a non-issue. We share and borrow ideas back and forth with no hesitation. We cheer each other on, celebrate successes and achievements, and offer that pat on the back that we all need at times. We have talked about working together on grants, exhibit fabrication, and program development, but we haven’t been able to pursue those ideas yet.

**Virginia:** We don’t have a ton of competition since we are all far enough apart that we don’t have much audience overlap. We all come together to learn, discover, and share.

- What have you learned—or what has surprised you—about this group?

**AfricaPlayNetwork:** While we advocate for increased access to play opportunities for children all over the continent, each organization and leader has a unique approach. A surprising benefit has been learning about work we have already been doing—networks created, lessons learned—increasing our respect for each other’s work and impact.

**NorCal:** I needed and have come to enjoy close contact with fellow executive directors, particularly ones nearby in similar circumstances! With most of us working from home, we had time to connect and set up a dedicated time to do so.

**Louisiana:** Nothing surprises us in Louisiana anymore, especially dealing with this past year’s pandemic and natural disasters. We really enjoy visiting with other on our Zoom calls.

**NCScienceNetwork:** I have been surprised (or at least heartened) that such a collaborative organization exists and has such a convivial and mutually supportive character. Having been a member of numerous museum-related organizations throughout my career, few seem to have such a high degree of collegiality and genuine recognition of the benefit of sharing rather than competing.

**Ohio:** Everyone thinks their museum is unique, but we have learned that we are much more alike. Our differences are very small in comparison to the overall needs of children’s museums during this pandemic.

**SmallMuseumCollaborative:** How quickly the group gelled once we started the monthly calls, which speaks to the need for more of these groups. Since we had been meeting for a year before COVID, we already had the support system in place when we needed it the most.
Virginia: We have all learned so much about the re-emerging processes going on in different communities and to hear how like-minded folks are solving similar challenges.

• How do you handle inclusiveness?

AfricaPlayNetwork: Over the years, we have developed a deep sense of deep trust and mutual respect. The group provides a confidential, mutually-supportive space to share our successes and challenges. We want to expand but have kept the executive group small, because we are all so constrained for time/money—we simply don’t have the resources to allocate to expansion. However, we would love to share knowledge and practice with others in this field working in various contexts across Africa. We are currently looking for partners to help us expand the network to include others across the continent who share a commitment to amplifying Africa-led initiatives to promote play and playful learning.

NorCal: Although we have extended the invitation broadly, the group has established an equilibrium among the regular attendees. But it's not exclusive, and we would welcome more members who have time to participate. In fact, with the intense lobbying for funding/ARP relief going on, we are reaching out to others to join.

Louisiana: Our group is open to all children’s museum directors in Louisiana.

NCScienceNetwork: We are open to anyone who meets the membership criteria.

Ohio: We ask each institution to send a representative to the monthly meeting, but we let that representative be determined by the institution.

SmallMuseumCollaborative: Keeping the group small fosters relationship building and makes the monthly conversations manageable so all participants can have a voice. We aren’t intentionally limiting membership, but we aren’t actively looking for more members either.

Virginia: We include anyone who asks to be invited.

• Have any of the past year’s COVID-focused conversations sparked ideas for ways to work together in the future?

AfricaPlayNetwork: Working together more through digital media is one intriguing idea. COVID has exposed digital divides, but each of us has also seen how increasingly accessible technologies (e.g. smart phones with WhatsApp and other low-data apps), can be used to promote locally relevant content for children, parents, and educators.

Amowi: “I have been so deeply impressed with the way Play Africa Children’s Museum and Imagination Afrika used the virtual space to address the socio-emotional and physical wellbeing of children and parents through regular virtual African storytelling events, dance, and movement sessions and parent-guidance. The COVID period has simply amplified and validated existing practice—which has evolved organically—of attentive, active, and generous interaction online.”

NorCal: We haven’t gotten there yet, but we may share exhibits or other tangible resources, grant writers or other staff, and have discussed coordinating on a capacity-building grant that would benefit all of us.

NCScienceNetwork: The fact that we all faced some level of peril motivated us to seek support. We shared best practices regarding the health and safety of our visitors and staff, and sought funding to distribute among the member institutions. I hope that this sort of exchange and dialogue will continue into the future regarding non-COVID issues.

SmallMuseumCollaborative: Once all the museums in the group are operating sustainably, we intend to resume our plan to broaden the collaborative to other museum departments. This will build more working relationships among our organizations and provide professional development for staff, which is often unaffordable. We have discussed partnering on various projects, however, the group’s core purpose is to be an informal support system, which has been proven to be the most valuable part of the effort.

Virginia: Our conversations include all aspects of the museum field. We talk about how to solve problems in our own museums, as well as future collaborative grant efforts.

SmallMuseumCollaborative
Membership currently stable
Children’s Museum of Brownsville | Brownsville, TX
Don Harrington Discovery Center | Amarillo, TX
Discovery Center at Murfree Spring | Murfreesboro, TN
Hands On! Regional Museum | Johnson City, TN
Mayborn Museum | Waco, TX
Mayer Museum at Angelo State University | San Angelo, TX
Mid-America Science Museum | Hot Springs, AR
Museum of Texas Tech University | Lubbock, TX
The Discovery Science Place | Tyler, TX

Diane LaFollette, executive director of Mid-America Science Museum, wanted to create an informal collaborative group to share and address issues unique to smaller museums. The group started with seven museums in 2019; two more joined in 2020. Participating museums are located in states bordering Arkansas, in or near a population area of less than 200,000, with operating budgets of less than $3 million.

The group began meeting in-person or on group phone calls and later through monthly one-hour Zoom meetings. Initially planned and organized by LaFollette, meetings are now led by mutual agreement.

—Diane LaFollette
Mid-America Science Museum
• What makes this group function so well? Tips for other people looking to start their own groups?

**AfricaPlayNetwork**: We share a fundamental integrity of purpose, mutual respect and a clear Africa-centered focus. It helps to know who you are and what you stand for right from the beginning. This is an amazing group of women, leaders and pioneers in any circumstances, even outside of the field.

**NorCal**: As with any well-functioning volunteer group, every member needs to be committed and consistent. Our commitment has grown over time because our bi-weekly meetings have provided real benefits, including social and emotional ones. The women in our group support each other—we are all going through the same crisis. But even when one museum is facing a unique challenge, the group listens, commiserates, and offers helpful ideas.

As leaders of institutions, we all have executive functioning skills, but we bring our people skills to our Zoom meetings as well—making sure everyone has a voice and time to share. Interestingly, none of us claims a leadership role. Our conversations and group work have been much more mutual and collaborative. Members express appreciation for each other regularly. That certainly builds connection and sustainability. In our most recent meeting (June 10, 2021), even though most of us are now reopening, we unanimously agreed to keep the group calls going. Everyone concurred: it’s the most fun meeting we have, and there will always be needs in the future that we need to talk about.

**Louisiana**: We have learned so much about our work, our memberships and families, our donors, our staff, and most importantly ourselves, and we have helped each other think outside of the box so many times this past year. Our tip to future groups? Use your collective strengths and passion for what you do to your advantage.

**NCScienceNetwork**: Be prepared to work. In the past, the network had a full-time director whose principle responsibilities included fundraising and administrative responsibilities. Now, those responsibilities are shared among the volunteer board of directors and other members. Diligence and consistency are required by all. It may help a new group to source start-up funds to ensure that necessary tasks can be accomplished, e.g. financial records and reporting, meeting scheduling and arranging, program development, etc.

**Ohio**: The group functions well out of mutual respect, a willingness to ask questions, and the openness of our members to share unconditionally their best advice.

**SmallMuseumCollaborative**: There are no attendance requirements, financial commitments, by-laws, or minutes. People join the call as their schedules allow. We have no plans to develop any kind of formal structure or association. Keeping the number of participants low ensures equal and active participation.

**Virginia**: We all come together openly, share a deep respect for each other, and appreciate the support.