

*The following remarks were originally presented by Carole Charnow, President & CEO, Boston Children's Museum at the Association of Children's Museums Anniversary Celebration Reception on March 1, 2023. Shared with permission.*



Thank you, Arthur for your leadership in our field and thank you Joe for your service to ACM. It's a true honor for me to be amongst this distinguished group of speakers and friends at this wonderful occasion to reflect on Mike Spock's leadership and Boston Children's Museum's role in the growth and development of the Association of Children's Museums.

The explosion of children's museums over the past 60 years is cause for great joy. And we are joined in this celebration by millions and millions of children and families, early childhood educators, and community agencies. Importantly, we are also joined by professionals in the fields of psychology, neuroscience, medicine, public health, and education, all of whom have added legitimacy to our organizations by making the case for children's museums through their research.

Now over 100 years old, both The Brooklyn and Boston Children's Museums emerged from Progressive Era reforms geared to addressing socio-economic problems through democracy and social justice. Within this environment, Brooklyn and Boston's missions were to prepare young people to grow into responsible, thoughtful citizens, develop agency, and learn how to learn. Said Delia Griffin, the Museum's Founding Director in 1926: "Observation is the natural foundation of education, and every act of curiosity is a movement toward intellectual freedom."

But, by 1960, Boston Children's Museum needed a shakeup and Mike Spock was hired to overhaul the museum. Mike had attended progressive schools, but his dyslexia made it difficult for him to read and write. Instead, he discovered the power of immersive learning as he explored New York City museums and neighborhoods.

In his memoirs, Mike describes how he struggled to define a children's museum. As he said, "an art museum is about art; a history museum is about history, but what is a children's museum?" He concluded that Boston Children's Museum should be not about SOMETHING, as the objects in our collection, but for SOMEONE, that is - children and families - their interests, needs, and ways of learning. This paradigm shift launched a revolution in children's museums and, eventually, the whole museum field.

So - what did it mean to be for SOMEONE and why is that idea so durable? We need to define two critical elements within this new idea: Part one is: hands-on exhibits and programs, and the other is: the

focus on the client. Mike advocated for programmatic techniques that matched how children learn: by doing. Exhibits needed to be designed to spark the child's curiosity, creativity, and imagination, and promote the habits of mind needed to learn.

Part two of the for SOMEONE is the focus on the client. This demands close collaboration, communication, and cooperation with the museum's communities so that we can learn from, about, and with our communities, and about the critical issues they face.

Coming up with cool and impactful museum experiences requires this two-pronged analysis of the for SOMEONE idea. I think of this process as a kind of gap analysis: what do children need MORE of, and what can we do to address these gaps?

And this brings us to the founding of the Association of Children's Museums sixty years ago. Mike and others felt that, in the early years, many in the museum field did not respect the legitimacy of children's museums, thinking they were less than "real" museums. So - he and his colleagues advocated for an independent professional association devoted to supporting the distinct needs of children and families. There are so many brilliant examples of how we, as individual museums and as an association, grapple with the ever-changing needs of children and families.

The Association of Children's Museums has taken on early childhood education in public spaces, the importance of play, disability awareness and inclusion, the obesity epidemic, climate change, supporting communities at times of tragedy, and more. As advocates for children and families we have become critical community and civic spaces where children and families can play, have fun and learn, be together, share and belong; find comfort and heal.

And now? Several years ago, Elizabeth Merritt talked about the EMPATHY DEFICIT. Like all of you, Boston Children's Museum's commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion is deeply embedded throughout the Museum. Just recently, we opened a new permanent exhibit, You Me We, which focuses on the intersectional aspects of identity; including race, ethnicity, gender, religion, family composition, and more. It explores bias, and provides tools for building understanding, and developing empathy - a gap that all of us are seeking to address.

At its core, the Association of Children's Museums is a community with strong values that we share and espouse. We all share a commitment to collaboration; equal participation of diverse voices; equity and inclusion; advocacy; and, of course, innovation. We have strong points of view and, like our early predecessors, we seek democracy and social justice.

At our core, we are dedicated to, "making better citizens," as Michelle Obama said so eloquently in her 2013 National Medal address. And is there truly anything more crucial at this moment in our history than making better informed, empathetic and engaged citizens?

We are all grateful to ACM for your support and leadership through the good times and the hard times over these past 60 years - and here's to all the joy, play and exploration of the next 60! Many congratulations and thank you!