# Practicing Civic Engagement: Making your Museum into a Community Living Room

**Stephen Long**

**Abstract** For over a decade, museum educators have discussed the need for civic or community engagement, where according to the American Alliance of Museums, a museum becomes "a center where people gather to meet and converse and an active, visible player in civic life, a safe haven, and a trusted incubator of change." What are the obstacles to practicing civic engagement and do the benefits outweigh the costs? In this paper, Stephen Long proposes a definition of community and makes the case that civic engagement can help a museum address pressing social concerns and needs. While there are many costs, the benefits far outweigh the expense. Not only does this engagement ensure that the museum remains relevant to the public, it can help raise more money, erase negative perceptions, increase attendance, and bring new vitality to the museum. As America's demographics continue to change ever more quickly, it's imperative for a museum's long-term success that it continues to change to meet the needs of these increasingly diverse communities.

Do you remember your first Halloween costume? I dressed up as a skeleton when I was four years old and I remember my younger sister was Little Red Riding Hood. For most children, wearing a Halloween costume to school is an annual ritual and they can tell you what they wore in each grade. Yet, what if your school couldn't or wouldn't host a Halloween party? That's what the Children's Museum of the East End (CMEE) learned from the teachers of the local Head Start preschool that meets daily in the Museum's classroom.

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Sensitive to religious beliefs that don't condone Halloween celebrations, Long Island Head Start does not allow its local Head Start Centers to sponsor Halloween parties.

Located on the East End of Long Island, CMEE hosts a popular Halloween party every year for its members that is typically attended by 150 children plus their parents or caregivers. Knowing that their students were very excited about dressing up in costumes, the Head Start teachers asked the Museum if their students and their families could attend the party at CMEE, too. Making less than $25,000 per year and speaking very little English, the Long Island Head Start parents didn't feel comfortable and couldn't afford to bring their children on their own. The teachers estimated an additional 50 children coming from Head Start with their families.

If you were in charge of this event at your museum, what would you say to the teachers? If you were concerned about costs, you'd probably say no. "We haven't budgeted for the additional attendance!" If you were concerned about wear and tear on the museum, you'd probably say no. "We're already at capacity!" You can't justify giving special treatment to Head Start so you'd have to say no. "If we admit one group, we have to do the same for everyone!"

While it seems silly to use these reasons to exclude a group of children from attending a Halloween party, these are the same justifications often used by museums professionals for not engaging their local community to help address social concerns. If a museum helps a "special" audience like children from Head Start, it's taking time and resources from "public" or "traditional" museum visitors. By involving the Head Start teachers or any other outsiders, museum staff members cede some control over the programming.

Engaging local communities to address their needs and concerns does come with costs, but it can be done with partnerships, leadership, and organizational commitment. The benefits far outweigh the expense. Civic or community engagement can help a museum become what the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) described as "a center where people gather to meet and converse and an active, visible player in civic life, a safe haven, and a trusted incubator of change."[1] And perhaps more importantly to museum directors and boards of trustees, community engagement can help raise more money, erase negative perceptions, increase attendance, and bring new vitality to the museum. While not explicitly part of the AAM's definition, these symbiotic outcomes are at the core of what characterizes civic engagement.

## Overcoming the Obstacles to Civic Engagement

In the ten years since AAM made its call to master civic engagement, museum professionals have discussed the many challenges they face when trying to address social concerns. During the AAM Annual Meeting in 2004 when I was working at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, two of my co-workers, Liz Sevcenko and Maggie Russell-Ciardi, participated in a panel entitled "Practicing Civic Engagement" that identified several obstacles:

- Effectively learning about and working with community members
- Getting people to work together
- The amount of time it takes to do things collaboratively
- Lack of support from colleagues throughout the museum
- Lack of strong leadership

Overcoming the lack of strong leadership is especially difficult. Liz, Maggie, and I were lucky to work at the Tenement Museum where we did not have to confront that challenge. Its founder and president, Ruth J. Abram, was an early advocate for committing museums to civic engagement. With her leadership, she put in place a staff that believed like she did that museums should address social issues. The Tenement Museum was the first museum to employ me in 1994 and, at the time, I assumed all museum directors were like Ruth. I soon discovered how few were committed to learning about and addressing the social needs of the community. Some museum professionals even scoffed at the notion that a museum could affect any social change. Others who were excited by the idea said their Museum's Board would never be supportive.

I was also lucky because the Tenement Museum's interpretive content, which focused on the history of immigration and working-class housing in New York City, provided dozens of topics that could be used to engage diverse communities to address social issues. For example, residents of 97 Orchard Street had advocated for changes in housing regulation and labor law and they had negotiated changing definitions of what it meant to be American. It's not quite so easy to identify the social issues that can be raised in a museum that interprets a gentry mansion or a collection of decorative arts. Moreover, the Tenement Museum presents the stories of immigrants from the past, which can be compared and contrasted with immigrants today. It's much harder to find contemporary counterparts to the stories told by John Singer Sargent paintings.

Moreover, the Tenement Museum's mission at that time — "to promote tolerance and historical perspective through the presentation and interpretation of the variety of immigrant and migrant experiences on Manhattan's Lower East Side, a gateway to America" — practically compelled the Museum's staff to engage with addressing social issues. Promoting tolerance and historical perspective forces the Museum to look outward to its audience and diverse communities because the mission raises questions about why and for whom the promotion of tolerance and historical perspective were needed. If the Tenement Museum's mission was merely "to preserve and educate the public about the variety of immigrant and migrant experiences on Manhattan's Lower East Side," it could have easily ignored the contemporary implications of the past. Just because the Tenement Museum interpreted immigration in a largely immigrant neighborhood, doesn't mean it needed to involve itself in addressing issues surrounding contemporary immigration.

Although it did not have to overcome the internal obstacles to civic engagement, the Tenement Museum staff still faced the challenge of addressing audience expectations. The typical way that visitors see the Tenement Museum is through a guided tour led by a museum educator. Often visitors questioned why they were hearing about today's immigrants when they came to the Museum to learn about how their ancestors lived. Even the leaders of social service agencies that assisted immigrants questioned the Museum's efforts to engage recently arrived immigrants. For example, a staff member at a Lower East Side settlement house — who was an immigrant herself — dismissed the Tenement Museum's ability to address her clients' concerns. "They're too busy," she said. "They work long hours and they have limited English skills and little interest in visiting an old house in the neighborhood." She suggested we would have better luck with their children through the school system.

The settlement house worker was right. It was unrealistic to expect that new immigrants would have the time or inclination to take a guided historic house tour. But if the guided tour didn't meet their needs, were there other ways that the Tenement Museum could serve as a resource for recently arrived immigrants? And, how could the Museum benefit from the input and engagement of new immigrants? This is a set of questions that I believe all museum educators must ask if they want their museums to remain at the center of civic life. America is changing quickly and the missions and interpretive strategies that informed the work of museums in the past must change. As Jennifer Amdur

Spitz and Margaret Thom, the editors of *Urban Network: Museums Embracing Communities* recently noted,

> Recent census data clearly illustrates how the United States population is diversifying. As the United States population changes, the success of museums' abilities to build relationships with the increasingly diverse urban communities around them will continue to impact institutional values, goals, and organizational culture. Engaging new and diverse audiences requires that museums do something different from what they have done before. Inherent in these efforts is a certain degree of risk and uncertainty in exploring new and different strategies. These are risks that museums are increasingly willing to take to remain relevant and vital centers of civic life.[2]

It's not just urban communities that are changing and diversifying. For example, Long Island's immigrant population has more than doubled since 1980 and their 7% increase has been far greater than that for the Long Island population as a whole. More than half of all immigrants coming to Long Island in the last dozen years have been from Latin America.[3]

## Museums Giving as Much as They Get

America's changing demographics mean that it's no longer a question of whether a museum should engage in addressing social issues, but a matter of how and for whom. In his article "An Agenda for American Museums in the 21st Century," Harold Skramstad urged museums to come up with new metaphors for the work they do in order to unlock their community potential. He recommended adding "caregiving" to a museum's responsibilities in addition to its traditional collections focus.[4]

Skramstad's concept of the caregiving museum is appealing and useful for three reasons: (1) Caregiving is already an important value in most museums. Not only do museums "get" collections, they also care for them. Is caring for the community so different? (2) Seeing the museum as a caregiver aligns the museum with social service agencies that are also committed to caring for those who seek or need something. (3) Finally, at its core, community engagement and service are about relationship building, giving as much as we get. If we're getting collections, stories, or support from our audiences, what are we giving in return? Do we adequately reciprocate and provide for others' future success? So while there are certainly "costs" to engaging the community

in addressing social concerns, the benefits to this effort should make up for the expense. If the relationship isn't equal, the museum's attempt at community engagement — like any enterprise — is bound to fail. And if there are no communities to visit, use, share, and engage with a museum, there will be no future for the museum.

In the *Social Work of Museums*, Lois Silverman reiterates the concept of a relationship-centered, socially-focused museum and expands on the notion of a caregiving museum by suggesting that museum professionals should see themselves as social workers. Community engagement isn't just about presenting interpretive content to new audiences. Like a social worker, Silverman urges museum professionals to learn their visitor/client's wants and needs. Only by addressing these needs do museums really have a measurable impact on their communities.[5]

The challenges presented by an uninspiring mission, a lack of leadership, a dysfunctional organizational structure, or inimical audience expectations could potentially prevent a museum from engaging any new development, not just a commitment to addressing social concerns. I've found that overcoming obstacles like these is easier if we — as educators and leaders — embrace the political role we can play within our museums. The idea of a museum being political might sound like an anathema, but I'm not suggesting that a museum should function in a partisan manner. If we want museums to function as civic spaces, then we should manage them like civic officials and acknowledge our role as representing our local communities.

## Museums Meeting the Needs of the Community

How do we presume to represent our local communities? We first need to define what we mean by "community." Too often we talk about "community engagement" in museums and assume everyone understands. At the Tenement Museum, we defined our museum community as a group of stakeholders, i.e. people who shared something about the stories we told and/or how we presented them. This might be someone who shared the Museum's geography or socioeconomic background of the people we interpreted. Sometimes stakeholders identify themselves by visiting, working for, or providing financial support to the Museum.

The challenge is cultivating and reaching out to people who haven't acknowledged they hold a stake in the museum, like the settlement house worker who

told the Tenement Museum staff that we'd be better off ignoring immigrant adults in the neighborhood and concentrating on their children. How could we as a museum staff possibly change this perspective? Should we bother? If immigrants didn't want to tour the tenement with the general public, the Tenement Museum staff decided to find out what other needs they had that could potentially be addressed by the Museum's resources. By listening to immigrant advocates, Ruth Abram discovered that newcomers faced lengthy waiting periods for affordable English classes. In response, she asked Museum staff to develop its own ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) program that would use the history of immigration to teach language skills. During evaluations of the program, Museum staff discovered that while immigrants came expecting only to improve their English, they left with a much deeper understanding of their place in the American saga. They realized they were not alone in adapting to the U.S. Others had done it before them. By developing a resource that fitted the needs of this community, the Tenement Museum was able to fulfill its mission of promoting historical perspective. Equally as important, the museum became a community asset.

How do we learn the needs of the community? It sounds obvious, but the first step for meeting the needs of the community is to meet the community. So how do we go about meeting with the community? When colleagues from other museums have asked me that question, I ask them to identify the content of the museum and then identify what local organizations might be interested in that content but aren't in contact with the museum. For example, when the Tenement Museum began planning an exhibit about the garment industry and the changing definition of the word "sweatshop," we contacted organizations that represented garment workers, manufacturers, jobbers, designers, and consumers to invite their input on the exhibit and how it should interpret the needle trades.

Learning about the needs of the community isn't solely the work of the museum director, exhibit designer, or senior leadership. Everyone on staff should spend time meeting with community members and listening to their needs. These meetings can take place informally by attending functions presented by the school board or civic groups like the Rotary, Kiwanis, or Lions' Club, or even during conversations while shopping at local stores. Although junior staff may not be able to authorize the implementation of new community programming, their contacts and interactions with community members can serve as a formative evaluation for museum planning.

## Changing Perceptions of the Museum

Before I started as the executive director of the Children's Museum of the East End (CMEE), Ruth Abram encouraged me to ask my new colleagues for recommendations about who I should get to know in the East End. In addition to local school officials, business owners, and the heads of arts organizations, Museum staff, trustees, and members suggested dozens of leaders of social service agencies, religious institutions, and immigrant advocacy groups.

As I began meeting with this diverse group of community leaders, I learned there is a higher percentage of immigrants in the area of CMEE than on Long Island as a whole. During the 2011–12 school year, the percentage of Latino students in many East End primary schools was over 40%. I was surprised to discover that one-third of students receive free or subsidized lunch in some local school districts. You typically don't read about these kinds of issues and needs in much of the press coverage about the area as the "Hamptons."

I was especially stunned by how different the perceptions of CMEE were from my understanding of the Museum, even among many of the Museum's members. Although CMEE was started by eight moms who lived in the area year round and were concerned about the lack of educational resources for young families, the Museum had, I learned, become largely associated with the Hamptons summer community. This perception was expressed directly to me when I joined a Board Member in meeting with a supporter of local nonprofit organizations. The funder asked us why we were seeking a grant when, as far as she was concerned, the Museum was only a rainy-day destination for second-home owners. Despite its grass-roots origins, free programming for child care centers and local schools, and free memberships that it distributed to hundreds of families, the Museum was perceived to be irrelevant to the local community. Perceptions like this made fundraising an enormous challenge, particularly with the advent of the "Great Recession" in 2008 when many potential donors assumed CMEE had somebody with deep pockets behind it and didn't need any additional support.

With the Museum facing dire financial circumstances in late 2008, the board and staff met together and with many stakeholders to discuss how to proceed. Several supporters said the problem with the Museum was the Board of Trustees. Too many of them were part-time residents and CMEE needed to recruit only Trustees who had year-round connections. One problem with eliminating "summer people" as trustees is that a significant portion of philanthropic support in any resort community comes from part-time residents. How to proceed?

As CMEE looked to add more year-round residents to the board, I met with the executive directors of many nonprofit organizations, including Bob DeLuca of the Group for the East End to ask for advice on how to change perceptions of the Museum. The head of an organization devoted to protecting the East End environment and inspiring people to embrace a conservation ethic, Bob was highly recommended to me as someone who had built a nonprofit that epitomized "grass roots." When I asked him about recruiting more year-round trustees, he surprised me by saying that the Group for the East End had fewer full-time residents on the board now than when he started at the organization. He believed the organization's actions were far more important than the makeup of the board and suggested that if CMEE wanted to signal its willingness to serve the community, Museum staff should get actively involved with other organizations that served children.

Community engagement had been implicit in CMEE's original mission, but after hearing input from Bob and other Museum stakeholders, the Board of Trustees made the commitment explicit with a new mission in 2009 "to enrich the lives of children and families and strengthen the East End community by promoting learning through play." CMEE's Board also made meeting with leaders of civic and social service agencies a priority for the Museum. CMEE staff members now spend as much time meeting with members of the community as they do developing classes and school field trips, planning exhibits, fundraising, and managing the facilities. During the meetings with local social service providers, CMEE asks them to describe what issues they face and together we brainstorm strategies for how the Museum's resources can help meet these challenges.

Early on, I met with the director of the Retreat, which is an advocate and service provider for families that have been affected by domestic violence. During our meeting, I proposed replicating the Children's Museum of Manhattan's "Shelter Program Curriculum" at CMEE where families from the Retreat could learn parenting skills and children could have a therapeutic outlet to confront the trauma they had experienced. Although intrigued by the program, she wasn't interested in making it a priority for her organization.

Reflecting on the meeting later, I realized that while supposedly "brainstorming" I had spent time trying to make a case for how I envisioned we should work together instead of listening to what her needs were. The Retreat already had programs in place to teach parenting skills so I was basically suggesting a redundant program. My failure to engage the Retreat effectively reminded me of Stephen Weil's definition of what makes a museum "good" in his

chapter "Museums: Can and Do They Make a Difference?"[6] Intending to make a positive difference isn't enough by itself. Museum professionals need to be skillful in how they use their resources, which I hadn't been.

I got a second chance many months later when the director of the Retreat took a new position and was replaced by Jeffrey Friedman. I invited Jeffrey to meet me and tour the museum. Instead of suggesting how we could work together, I asked him to imagine how CMEE might be a resource for families at the Retreat. He noted that the Museum had a classroom and wondered if it was available in the evening. He explained that the Retreat conducted job skills training classes, but their clients were hesitant to participate because child care wasn't available. He asked if CMEE could provide activities for the children of the parents who enrolled in the vocational training. Working together, we developed a program that runs for a series of weekly sessions when CMEE is closed to the public to ensure the families' privacy. Each week, children participate in art and play therapy while their mothers learn to write a resume, prepare for an interview, and other job skills in CMEE's classroom. The Retreat is responsible for transporting the families and managing the vocational training for the mothers while CMEE organizes the art and play therapy sessions. In evaluating the collaboration, CMEE and the Retreat learned that ten of the 14 mothers had either found employment or had arranged an interview. Although harder to measure, their children exhibited positive behavioral changes, as well. They expressed themselves more openly, demonstrated creative problem solving, and exercised greater self-control.

In collaborating with the Retreat, CMEE learned that its public programming and exhibits weren't necessarily the resources that were most needed by families in the community. Museums need to be open to the idea that resources such as space, staffing, or social media expertise may be more important than its interpretive programming for engaging the community and addressing social issues.

When trying to address community concerns, it's typically much easier to partner with another organization than it is with one person or a group of individuals. For example, while participating in a fair where Spanish-speaking residents could learn about local educational resources, CMEE staff learned about the limited access to early childhood education in the East End from staff of Long Island Head Start. In the midst of conversations at the fair, the Head Start representative mentioned that there were 60 low-income families in the East End who were eligible for Head Start but sat on a waiting list. When

asked why they had a waiting list, the Head Start staff member said it was because they lacked classroom space.

After learning about the lack of space for accessible early childhood education, CMEE could potentially have decided to start its own preschool. While this would have guaranteed the Museum's complete control over the program, CMEE had no experience running a preschool. It made much more sense to partner with Long Island Head Start and provide them with a classroom, which I eagerly suggested to the Museum's Board of Trustees. Not all of them were supportive, however. In their opinion, giving up the classroom to Head Start during the day was far different than making it available to the Retreat during the evening. Not having use of the classroom during the day would mean that some programs and workshops had to be moved to other less ideal spaces in the Museum. In addition, several Board members felt that providing the space to Head Start signaled that the Museum was giving some groups special treatment. In fact, around the same time, the Museum was offered a substantial amount of money by a private preschool to rent the same classroom. If CMEE was going to give up any resources, argued one of the trustees who actually didn't want to rent the space at all, it should be to an organization that could directly help the Museum's financial sustainability.

After much discussion, the Board decided to go ahead with providing the space to Long Island Head Start. While all of the trustees acknowledged the drain on CMEE's resources, the majority of trustees felt that the benefits to the Museum of addressing concerns within the community outweighed the costs. Rather than being used sporadically for public programs, the classroom is used from 9am to 4pm, Monday through Friday by 16 children. In addition to being used for lessons, the classroom serves as a dining area for the children's breakfast and lunch and a nap space. The Museum's exhibits are used for daily "field trips" by the students and the teachers. For example, on any given day, they may paint in CMEE's art studio, experiment with wind power in CMEE's windmill exhibit, or take on the role of community leaders like firefighters or farmers in CMEE's pretend play area.

Not only do these collaborations — in Stephen Weil's words — "make the museum good," they significantly benefit the Museum's financial sustainability long term. Partnering with social service organizations like the Retreat and Long Island Head Start has helped CMEE raise money. Funders like these collaborations because CMEE can easily demonstrate a measurable impact in such long-term collaborations, something that is much harder during a single visit to the Museum. These programs are also attractive to donors because they know

their money will help more than one institution. And working with other nonprofits has enabled CMEE to secure funding that would normally be unavailable. For example, after the success of its initial partnership, CMEE started working with the Retreat on their Suffolk County Fatherhood Initiative, which is funded through the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Family Assistance (OFA).

Just as important as the financial support it brings, community engagement through jointly-developed collaborative projects creates an energy and sense of vitality in the Museum. Parents from Long Island Head Start have helped with a range of projects at the Museum, including painting, constructing room dividers, and translating parts of CMEE's website into Spanish. The Retreat and other organizations assisted in recruiting more volunteers to the Museum. And as word about CMEE's partnerships with social service agencies spread, other groups contacted the Museum to see if they could make use of CMEE's facilities. We have responded in a number of new and exciting ways:

- As a result of meeting with staff from Hampton Community Health Care, CMEE began hosting "Grupo de Madres Latinas," a weekly child care and nutrition class taught by instructors from the Cornell Cooperative Extension.
- Learning that CMEE's space was available after hours, the director of LINCT, a computer training program for Spanish-speaking adults, began hosting classes three nights each week at the Museum, using the Museum's wifi system to help students learn how to use online resources and computer programs.
- The Museum is also now hosting "respite nights," when children with autism have private use of the Museum under the guidance of trained facilitators while parents have some time to themselves.
- Working with Southampton Disabilities Advisory Committee, CMEE developed strategies for making the Museum more accessible, such as increasing the size of the typeface it uses in fliers and adding new curb cuts to its sidewalk. The Committee is also collaborating with CMEE and the Group for the East End, the Southampton Trails Preservation Society, and the Garden Club of East Hampton to develop an accessible walking trail on its property.

Changing perceptions about CMEE's interest in the community and increasing use of its facilities by social service agencies have helped to improve the general public's understanding of CMEE as a hub for children. With this

improved understanding has come a dramatic increase in public visitation. Since 2008, public attendance has grown over 40%, which has provided a similar increase in earned revenue. In CMEE's experience, there has been no real cost to engaging the community, only profit.

CMEE's exhibits and public programming haven't changed much in four years, but the difference in how our East End community talks about the Museum has been radical. Not long ago, a parent took me aside and said that she hoped I understood that CMEE wasn't a museum. "What do you mean?" I asked her, "isn't it a children's museum?" "No," she replied, "it's a community living room."

A community living room makes a great place for a Halloween celebration.

## Notes

1. Ellen Hirzy, *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2002). Founded in 1906, the American Alliance of Museums was known as the American Association of Museums until 2012.
2. http://amdurspitz.com/media/images//2010/02/The-Urban-Network.pdf.
3. Mariano Torras, *Strengthening Long Island: The Economic Contributions of Immigrants to Nassau and Suffolk Counties* (Garden City: Adelphi University, 2008).
4. Harold Skramstad, "An Agenda for American Museums in the 21st Century," *Daedalus* 128, no. 3 (Summer 1999) pp. 129–162.
5. Lois Silverman, *The Social Work of Museums* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
6. See chapter in Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 2002).

## About the Author

Stephen Long has served as Executive Director of the Children's Museum of the East End (CMEE) since June 2008. Under his direction, along with the Museum's staff and Board of Trustees, CMEE has increased its attendance, developed partnerships with an array of social service organizations in the community, and diversified its income streams. Prior to joining CMEE, Mr. Long worked at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum as the Vice President of Collections and Education. Mr. Long has consulted for dozens of museums around the country and taught courses on museums at New York University and the City College of New York. Before becoming a museum professional, Mr. Long worked as an award-winning radio producer. He has a Master of Arts in History from New York University and received his Bachelor of Arts from Middlebury College.