

**Building Community Partnerships by  
Meeting Needs and Utilizing Assets**



**Presented at the California Association of Museums Conference  
February 20 – 22, 2013 | Santa Barbara**

**COLLABORATOR: Stacey Marie Garcia, Director of Community Programs, Santa Cruz  
Museum of Art & History**

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“What do Little Leaguers need?”

“Well,... they need things to do when they’re not playing baseball.”

In one of the honeycombs labeled “NEED” I scribble “stuff to do” and look up at the group as I point to another space labeled “ASSETS.” “How about what they already have? Their assets, that is.

A group member offers “They have built-in teamwork skills. That’s definitely an asset.”

Before I am even able to write that down, someone adds “Oh! Cooperstown is so baseball-centric, it would be nice to highlight the community’s other offerings.”

“What about a science museum? They could do an exhibit like ‘The Science of Baseball’... explaining the physics of pitches, acceleration... that sort of thing. That way, we’re involving other organizations, but tying into Little Leaguers’ interests.”

“Yeah! And they also need to eat... maybe hold a special farmers market on the tournament grounds? Highlight the region’s agriculture and add a nutritional component to the usual hot dogs and nachos on offer at baseball games.”

My hand flies across the honeycomb matrix (diagram 1) filling in the various fields radiating from the nucleus “COMMUNITY – Little League teams,” trying to keep up with the ideas that are starting to flow freely and excitedly through the group.

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The interactive workshop during the 2013 CAM Conference session *Radical Collaboration: Tools for Partnering with Community Members* yielded a wealth of hypothetical outside-the-box collaboration ideas: package designers and Girl Scout troops; surfers and green energy activists; Little Leaguers and farmers. Great partnership pairings to be sure – some yielding obvious programming possibilities, others offering more subtle connections – but, one may ask, *where does the museum factor in?*

Presented by Stacey Marie Garcia, the Director of Community Programs at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History (MAH), the workshop was designed to give session participants a taste of the process that the museum goes through in developing each of its innovative community-

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based programs. However, more significant than the step-by-step “how-to” guidelines<sup>1</sup> discussed in the session was Stacey’s explanation of the museum’s core philosophy driving such collaborations – to “...represent and serve the diverse, talented and multifaceted communities in Santa Cruz County based on their needs, assets and interests.”<sup>2</sup> For MAH, this means pushing beyond traditional broad-stroke notions of communities to get at the heart of what really defines a particular community (think interests rather than ethnicity or age), and then working with those communities to develop programming that encourages “bonding within preexisting social groups and bridging between groups and individuals who might not usually interact.”<sup>3</sup>

The crux of this philosophy – the museum not creating programming so much as facilitating it – is what led workshop participants to the somewhat unconventional partnership pairings. By reversing the traditional trajectory of museum programming (in-house development that is then packaged to “fit” one community or the other) in favor of first assessing the needs and assets of a community, ideas were not limited by institutional parameters. What mattered was not the museum’s agenda, but the community’s (and the near-infinite sub-communities therein).

Having approached programming at MAH in this manner for two years, partnering with approximately 1,500 collaborators in the process, Stacey has seen the tremendous effect that these programs have had on both the museum and the communities with which it has partnered. Detailed below are two examples of these partnerships – the needs and assets that each sought to address, the program(s) that resulted, and the ripple effects that those programs spurred in both the museum and collaborating community.

### **MAH and the Resource Center for Nonviolence**

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<sup>1</sup> These detailed guidelines are available at <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2013/02/guest-post-radical-collaboration-tools.html>, and provide a wealth of information on best practices and tips for avoiding the potential pitfalls that can arise with such an externally-focused programming strategy.

<sup>2</sup> “Our Event Philosophy.” *Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History*. <http://www.santacruzmah.org/whatson/our-event-philosophy/>. April 6, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> “Our Event Philosophy.” *Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History*. <http://www.santacruzmah.org/whatson/our-event-philosophy/>. April 6, 2013.

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Photo Caption: First Friday October 2012 with Resource Center for Nonviolence;

Image courtesy: **Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History**

In 2012, the Resource Center for Nonviolence (RCNV) in Santa Cruz relocated to a new space while in the midst of a program assessment in which they were seeking increased community input into the development of their projects. Needing to spread the word about their new space and project approach with the wider Santa Cruz community, the RCNV reached out to MAH to inquire about partnership opportunities. However, the benefit of the partnership was not one-sided. Although RCNV needed MAH's volume and diversity of visitors, RCNV carried assets attractive to MAH as well. RCNV was incredibly talented and knowledgeable about activating social change at a grassroots level within the local Santa Cruz community – a knowledge set that MAH was eager to tap in to.

With museum visitors regularly numbering from 1,000 – 2,000 for their First Friday<sup>4</sup> programs, the monthly event was seen as an ideal occasion to raise awareness of RCNV's work through a programming partnership. Meeting frequently to plan activities that would create a participatory experience highlighting social issues and demonstrating how art could be used as a medium for social change (goals identified by RCNV and MAH, respectively), the two organizations developed three programs:

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<sup>4</sup> First Friday is an independent Santa Cruz-wide event the first Friday of each month that features a variety of programming at cultural venues throughout the city. For more information, visit: <http://firstfridaysantacruz.com/>.

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- 1.) Creating community peace flags with fabric, markers, and stencils of imagery that symbolized peace. This allowed participants to creatively and actively reflect on their personal understanding of peace.
- 2.) Contributing quotes, words, and ideas related to nonviolence on color-coded Post-its that were then laid on top of a mural of Martin Luther King Jr. This fostered a collaborative way for participants to share and explore different methods of nonviolent communication.
- 3.) A series of stories with corresponding clear glass jars in which participants placed strips of paper in colors representing various spectrums of violence and nonviolence that they believed were reflected in the stories. This not only presented a safe environment in which to explore sensitive issues (RCNV staff was on hand to facilitate discussions as well), but enabled participants to think critically about these issues, and see how their community responded.

These activities, since they were devised through equal participation of MAH and RCNV, resulted in a successful meeting of needs and utilization of assets between the two organizations. RCNV was able to connect to and share their work promoting peace and justice with a broader community, and MAH was able to highlight the role of creativity in bringing about social change, providing an opportunity for bridging participants from diverse backgrounds through active engagement in program activities. The success of the programming partnership led to continued collaboration between the organizations, with MAH working closely with individuals from RCNV to develop the museum's new teen program and future museum events.

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Photo Captions: 3<sup>rd</sup> Friday January 2012 with Book Arts Santa Cruz;  
Image courtesy: the **Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History**

Book Arts Santa Cruz (BASC) was an organization filled with talented, creative artists. Unfortunately, its presence did not extend much beyond its own membership. When MAH began receiving feedback from visitors expressing a desire for access to activities such as printmaking and papermaking, BASC emerged as a great potential partner. In particular, the museum was interested in partnering with BASC for its 3<sup>rd</sup> Friday programming, which, as Stacey explained, draws a smaller crowd (usually around 300 visitors), and is “focused on creating an engaging, interactive, hands-on experience through informal drop-in workshops and participatory demonstrations.” In addition to the exposure that the museum could offer BASC through a 3<sup>rd</sup> Friday event partnership, MAH’s considerable experience working collaboratively with artists to guide their skill sharing with the community was of tremendous benefit to participating BASC artists.

The event that grew out of MAH’s collaboration with BASC<sup>5</sup> was the 3<sup>rd</sup> Friday event *Poetry and Book Arts Extravaganza*, which took place January 2012, and featured many participatory activities including papermaking, marbling, book binding, book stitching, encaustics, and

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<sup>5</sup> Although this case study only examines one community partner per event, it is important to note that MAH’s programming is often the result of collaborations with several organizations and individual community members. In this way, each event offers visitors a means of comprehensive engagement with a topic or theme, and not only facilitates bridging of diverse audiences, but bridging of organizations within the community to one another as well.

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printmaking. MAH and BASC worked closely to design these activities to be accessible to all skill levels, and to foster intergenerational participation.

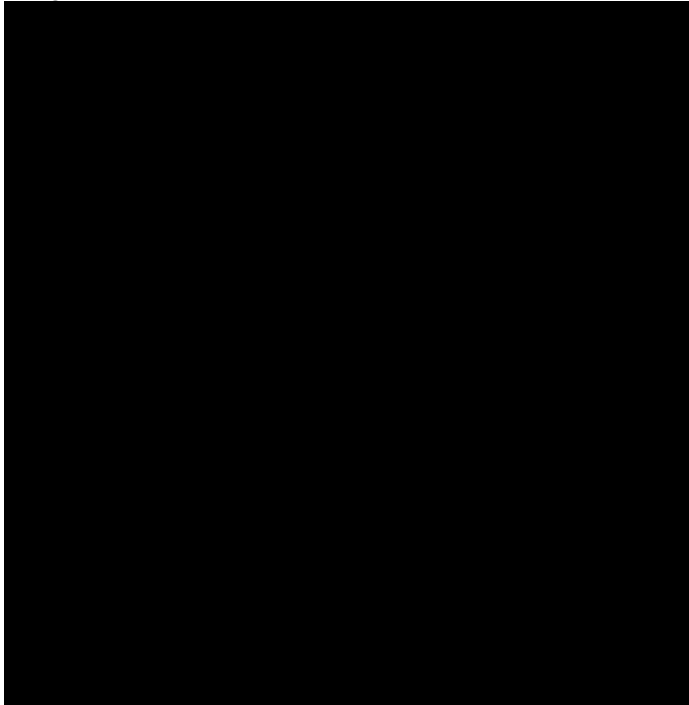
The event garnered substantial press coverage in local papers and on the radio, resulting in an even greater exposure of BASC and participating artists than originally imagined. MAH was able to offer visitors hands-on access to activities in which they were eager to engage, and the BASC artists were able to showcase their tremendous talent while building connections within the community through the sharing of their skills. The partnership was so successful in addressing all of MAH's touchstones for a meaningful collaboration – meeting community needs and assets, connecting people to history and art, offering opportunities for participation, and facilitating bonding and bridging – that the museum invited all the event participants to collaborate in a 2013 reprisal of a 3<sup>rd</sup> Friday *Poetry and Book Arts Extravaganza*. As a result of the connections that were forged through the event's first iteration, the brainstorming sessions for the second event felt more like a team endeavor than a meeting of disparate entities.

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While it is true that the session workshop led by Stacey at the CAM conference could not, for obvious reasons, include the actual community collaboration component illustrated in the above examples, it did provide participants with a solid understanding of the museum's point of entry for such partnerships – recognizing community needs and assets, and having a desire to provide a means of bridging and bonding across those communities. By laying this groundwork, museums can better position themselves to forge a more relevant and impactful presence within their communities through partnership-driven programming.

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Diagram 1



### About the Author/CAM Fellow



**Alison Konecki** graduated with a B.A. in Art History and English from Canisius College in Buffalo, N.Y. and received an M.A. in Art and Museum Studies from Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. While in D.C., she worked as the Development & Community Outreach Coordinator for Transformer, a non-profit alternative art space, and was Co-Founder of

Knowledge Commons DC – a free, self-generating “school” designed to provide non-traditional community learning and instruction. After transplanting to the West Coast in 2012, she became the Development Associate for the FOR-SITE Foundation in San Francisco, and a Fellow with Emerging Arts Professionals/SFBA. An aspiring travel and arts writer, she is intent on experiencing as much of the world’s cultural wealth as possible. She recently received a Narrative Travel Writing Award from *Transitions Abroad* for her piece “An American Girl in El Salvador.”