

# MY MUSEUM

Moving from Outreach to Relationships with  
Community Members in Low Income Housing

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**INTREPID**  
MUSEUM

Community engagement and outreach have long been buzzwords in the cultural life of New York City, yet studies have shown that many of the New Yorkers who are on the receiving end of outreach programs remain missing from the demographics of regular visitors to cultural institutions. The Intrepid Museum's own internal visitor research study identified the Museum's typical visitor as: educated (most have at least a college degree), affluent (average income of \$116K) and predominantly white (61%). This data is consistent with other cultural institutions such as art museums, as the National Endowment for the Arts 2008 *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*<sup>1</sup> illustrated.

These demographics do not reflect New Yorkers who are often the intended audience for outreach done by cultural organizations such as those New Yorkers represented by the typical New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) resident, 44% of whom do not have a high school diploma, have an average income of \$25-26K<sup>2</sup>, and only 4.8% of whom identify themselves as white<sup>3</sup>. As the NYCHA system reports providing homes for more than 400,000 New Yorkers, this is a significant loss of participation for the City's museum community.

A report from the American Alliance of Museums Center for the Future of Museums in 2010<sup>4</sup> indicated that some of the barriers which may be preventing these New Yorkers from visiting museums, beyond cost, include a lack of information and confidence about the visit, and a deep-rooted feeling of not belonging, which makes museums feel intimidating and exclusionary. This unintentional exclusion of New Yorkers who live in low income housing from participation in the City's cultural institutions, especially museums, has consequences which go beyond entertainment or even education.

As highlighted by a recent research study by the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy & Practice, cultural resources are "significantly" linked to better health, schooling and security in low-income neighborhoods in New York City<sup>5</sup>. Research also highlights the importance of providing improved access to New York City's museums for families and residents from low-income communities as an important step toward educational and social equity.

**MY CITY MY MUSEUM**  
Are you curious about space exploration, history, or how aircraft fly?

**SEA**  
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z 0 00

**SEA-CRET CODES**  
The U.S. Navy uses signal flags to communicate from ship to ship. Each flag represents a letter of the alphabet. By arranging together multiple flags, crew members can create messages. How would you spell your name using the signal flags?

**SPACE**  
**HAS AN ANIMAL EVER TRAVELED TO SPACE?**  
YES! Laika the dog, from the Soviet Union, was the first animal orbit Earth in space.

**FUN FACT**  
The Intrepid Museum has a historic connection to space! Intrepid retrieved astronaut Scott Carpenter after the Mercury 7 mission in 1962. Three years later in 1965, Intrepid picked up Gherman Titov, John Young and the Gemini 3 capsule, nicknamed the Unimable Molly Brown.

**Fun Fact:** Intrepid is 912 feet long and displaces 41,000 tons of water. You could fit three football fields on the top of the ship. If you stood on its end, it would be almost as tall as NYC's Chrysler Building!

**AIR**  
LIFT  
THRUST  
DRAG  
GRAVITY

**FOUR FORCES OF FLIGHT**  
Gravity pulls all things down toward the center of Earth. Lift pushes an aircraft up into the air. Thrust moves an aircraft in a forward direction. Drag moves an aircraft in a backwards direction.

**Fun Fact:** Did you know that Intrepid is an aircraft carrier? That means that not only can Intrepid carry aircraft, but that aircraft also take off from and land directly on the ship. Think of Intrepid as an airport in the middle of the ocean!

**INTREPID SEA, AIR & SPACE MUSEUM**  
The Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum is a non-profit, educational institution featuring the legendary aircraft carrier *Intrepid*. Active from 1943-1974, *Intrepid* has sailed around the world, serving World War II, the Cold War and the Vietnam War. This "city at sea" housed more than 50,000 sailors who were often at sea for six months at a time, living in tight quarters and always prepared for everything. Many even worked everyday jobs including doctors, dentists, fireman and bakers!

The My Museum Initiative is supported by a generous grant from the Booth Ferris Foundation.

**FREE MUSEUM ADMISSION** U.S. military and veteran with valid ID. Children 4 and under. CUNY students and faculty (with current CUNY ID). Visitors with an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card and a valid photo ID (good for cardholder and three guests) through the Museums for all program.

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intrepidmuseum.org

Although the Intrepid Museum offers free entry to EBT card holders and guests, as well as education programs at no cost to underserved students and adults throughout New York City, the Museum's audience surveys indicate that free admission is not sufficient to attract a significant number of New York's low-income and non-white residents outside of group trips. As a result, the Museum's My Museum pilot, supported by the Booth Ferris Foundation, initiated new approaches to incorporate the intended stakeholders' voices in the design and revision of its programs and offerings.

Also inspired by the City's Department of Cultural Affairs *Create NYC* initiative to address equity, access, affordability and social and economic impact of the cultural landscape, and grounded in a pre-existing relationship with several NYCHA communities, the My Museum project allowed us to put ideas into practice, to reflect, evaluate, adjust and strengthen cultural programming together, providing a model for the rest of the cultural community.

# THE PROCESS

The My Museum Initiative was originally a two-year pilot project undertaken by the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum aimed at developing and testing a model of communication and collaboration that will identify barriers, alleviate anxiety and develop museum-going habits by increasing NYCHA community members' self-identification as museumgoers and participants in the rich cultural life of NYC.

Grounded in an inclusive evaluation approach, engaging representative stakeholders, the project design included the following:

- 1** Forming an Advisory Council made up of representatives from the City Council, NYCHA administrators, community liaisons and community leaders in NYCHA complexes, who met several times to share information about existing assets and affordable resources, inform the project design, plan its implementation and streamline the audience engagement effort.
- 2** Streamlining communication about the assets and affordable resources available across cultural and cross-agency sectors and developing a robust approach for community engagement and outreach.
- 3** Recruiting and facilitating community-based focus groups held both at the museum and at community sites to open a dialogue with NYCHA residents about needs, wants, barriers, and potential solutions for engaging with museums and other cultural institutions.
- 4** Creating Travelling Exhibit Informational Panels to be displayed in the common areas at NYCHA sites along with program information and visits by Museum education staff to familiarize residents with the staff and the Museum in an environment they're familiar and comfortable with prior to Museum visits.
- 5** Providing free, structured museum experiences, including weekend family programs at the Museum, for up to 1,800 first-time and repeat participants. Experiences capitalized on already existing programs refined with feedback from the Advisory Council and focus groups.
- 6** Conducting ongoing evaluation and research using a variety of methods, including focus groups and surveys of different stakeholders in the resident communities of the participating NYCHA sites with an independent facilitator/evaluator.
- 7** Sharing the results/adaptable models with other cultural organizations.

Necessarily iterative, as the foundational objective of the project was to incorporate input and be responsive to the thoughts and needs of the residents of NYCHA communities, elements of the design were adjusted as the work progressed.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be overstated, with the related prohibitions on gathering, along with the closure of museums and community sites. The timeline was expanded by nearly a year in the hopes of a return to a more usual practice, but policies and individual comfort levels around in-person gatherings remained a barrier to the original expression of opportunities for community voice. Nevertheless, much was achieved.

Based on previous relationships, five NYCHA Communities agreed to participate with *Intrepid* on this work: Marble Hill Houses (Bronx); Dyckman Houses (Manhattan); Richmond Terrace Houses (Staten Island); Woodside Houses (Queens); and Stanley Isaacs Houses (Manhattan). An advisory council of stakeholders was established, including peers from other cultural institutions, NYCHA community leaders, staff members and residents, New York City Council Member Alicka Ampry-Samuel (Chair of the Council's Committee on Public Housing) and members of her team and colleagues from the City's Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). Five resident focus groups were held (three at NYCHA sites, two at the Museum). Opportunities for residents to visit the Museum were organized, which were followed by a facilitated feedback session on the experience, handled by an external evaluator.

Thirty programs were held both at the Museum and onsite at the NYCHA communities for more than 2000 community members. Often free transportation was organized by the Museum to alleviate travel barriers. During the pandemic closures, twenty-five virtual programs were held in collaboration with the DYCD sites serving the NYCHA communities for 915 community participants. Bilingual informational materials were created and 200 local cultural resource maps of free opportunities in close proximity to the NYCHA communities were distributed.

Ten thousand informational brochures about free entry to Intrepid Museum and including a parking voucher were created with information in English and Spanish and mailed to community residents of the five NYCHA partner communities and four additional ones, and pop up informational "exhibits" about the Museum were created for community rooms. Through the New York City Museum Educator's Roundtable, a gathering of cultural organization peers reviewed the work and provided thoughts and feedback.

# KEY FINDINGS FOR BUILDING A RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIP

Through the above work of convenings, feedback and both formal and informal dialogues there were some key findings which surfaced as themes again and again and which can inform an action plan for moving from an outreach stance to a relationship. The steps in the plan seem simple, but require investment of time, energy and thought (as well as the funding to support the staff members doing those things). However, the investment will make the difference in actually developing a new museum-going public from this large and vital representation of New Yorkers.

## I. ENLIST STRATEGIC PARTNERS

In addition to reaching out to the NYCHA community leaders, enlisting partner organizations already known and trusted within the community is an invaluable first step to building relationships on the local level. These organizations can be local schools, houses of religion, libraries and other community-based organizations that offer everything from healthcare to job services. Look for organizations which have deep roots and longevity with the community. These organizations may be terrific program partners, can assist in communicating information about your organization and the opportunities available, and will provide insight into the community members and needs.

### My Museum Example:

When consistent communication with groups within the NYCHA houses proved to be a challenge, working with the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) which runs sites adjacent or even embedded within NYCHA communities serving everyone from students to seniors allowed us to easily organize programs for groups to visit the Museum. The Community League of the Heights (CLOTH) introduced the Museum to groups of primarily Spanish speaking community members, assisting in coordinating visits to the Museum.

## II. CONSISTENCY IS KEY

Showing up within the community, providing opportunities at your museum and maintaining an ongoing communication with sites over time builds trust, a sense of comfort, and shared ownership with your institution. “Showing up” doesn’t always mean with program materials. Attending PTA meetings, resident meetings or other opportunities for your staff members to listen and to give information builds familiarity and trust, and also gives opportunities for developing a deeper understanding of community needs and interests.

A challenge to creating a consistent presence is staff turnover in either the community, the community partners or the Museum. Taking the time to at least make email introductions during a staff transition is important. But even better is making sure that multiple staff members are present at planning meetings and programming so there can be some consistency in the people-to-people relationships. Eventually, even if there are a small group of “regulars” at events, they can be ambassadors for your institution to their friends and neighbors.

### My Museum Examples:

At the beginning of the project it was clear some of the tenants who had been to the Museum before were the ones who got others onto the bus and did the speaking at the focus group about reasons why museum visits were important. To their neighbors, the personal endorsement was motivating.

Even while the planned programming essentially ground to a halt during the pandemic, and the closing of NYCHA community spaces meant it was challenging to figure out a way to communicate with residents, Intrepid Museum staff members sent regular communications and occasional phone calls to maintain an open line to key community members and partner organizations, eventually working out virtual programs and distributing passes to be used once the Museum re-opened.

## III. LET GO OF ASSUMPTIONS

It sounds simple, but many assumptions are made about why a community may or may not be participating in museum programming. Rather than designing solutions to problems that may not exist, taking the time to gather information from the community one is hoping to engage about the reasons they are not attending and/or what will make them excited to attend will save time



**INTREPID**  
SEA, AIR & SPACE MUSEUM COMPLEX

VISIT THE INTREPID SEA, AIR & SPACE MUSEUM FOR A DYNAMIC, INTERACTIVE EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY THAT'S FUN FOR ALL AGES!

- Hop aboard the ship and learn about *Intrepid's* service.
- Visit the Space Shuttle Pavilion and see the space shuttle *Enterprise*, the prototype NASA orbiter that paved the way for the space shuttle program.
- Participate in science demonstrations, planetarium shows and visit the Museum's interactive exhibit space, specially designed for families and kids of all ages.

Use the coupon inside to gain free admission and parking to the Museum.



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PIER 86, W 46TH ST & 12TH AVE, NYC  
intrepidmuseum.org

**ENTRADA GRATIS**

Utilice el cupón adjunto para obtener una entrada gratuita al museo que admite hasta 4 personas.  
Válido hasta el 31 de diciembre de 2021.

**REGLAS DE SEGURIDAD**  
intrepidmuseum.org/onboard-with-safety

**MODOS ADICIONALES DE ENTRADA GRATIS**

- Militares de los Estados Unidos y veteranos con identificación válida
- Titulares de tarjetas Cool Culture
- Hijos (as) de edad 4 y menor
- Estudiantes y facultad de CUNY (con identificación actual)
- Visitantes con tarjetas EBT e identificación válida con foto suficiente para el titular de la tarjeta y tres invitados (Este es el límite de identificación. No recibir ningún cargo).
- Titulares de tarjeta de biblioteca pública a través Culture Pass: [www.culturepass.nyc](http://www.culturepass.nyc)

La entrada al Museo Intrepid es solo con boleto programado. El día que desee visitar, intercambie el cupón en la taquilla del museo por la pólizima hora de entrada disponible. Tenga en cuenta que es posible que los días de entrada no sea inmediata. Los boletines de entrada solo están disponibles en la taquilla del museo. Límite de 4 por transacción. Admisión sujeta a capacidad / disponibilidad y primera hora de entrada disponible. La oferta termina el 31 de diciembre de 2021. El Museo Intrepid está ubicado en la Intersección de W. 46th Street y 12th Avenue en la ciudad de Nueva York.  
La iniciativa Mi Museo recibe apoyo de una generosa beca de Booth Peritt Foundation.



and effort in the long run. Ways to ask can range from the more staff-time intensive focus groups to requesting to attend a community meeting with some tablets or even paper and clipboards to have people answer a quick survey.

**My Museum Example:**

While admittedly a self-selected group, many participants in this project's focus groups actually were participating regularly in visits to cultural institutions in the City, making use of things like Cool Culture passes or shared family memberships.

An uncomfortable uncovering from focus groups with NYCHA families was that one reason Intrepid Museum wasn't part of their leisure time habit is they weren't sure what exactly the Museum had to offer. From the report the facilitator compiled, "While many could say they would take their children to the zoo or aquarium because everyone likes animals, it was more difficult to describe why one would automatically come to the Museum."

Being free for most NYCHA residents under one of our pass programs wasn't enough of a motivator. Indeed, it wasn't cost so much as perceived value that emerged as a theme. A high value was placed on whether or not the experience was educational, fun and had something for the whole family. Other concerns included the investment of time and effort to travel with a family to the museum, not being able to find information on if they could bring their own food to eat on site and the lack of parking in the area.

The mention of a need for parking prompted the inclusion of parking vouchers in an informational mailing, something easily organized with a local parking garage and which would not have occurred to us without community input.

Another point mentioned was that while many cultural organizations offer free entry during festivals or other big events, there was a desire to spend time in smaller groups or with families, with adults and kids able to do things together.

They are looking for bonding opportunities or smaller events to meet other families in their community.

## IV. COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Understanding your audience segments within the NYCHA communities will inform strategies for communication. With the proliferation of affordable smart phones, the internet has been used as a greater source of information for a wider bracket of ages than ever before, especially for parents, young adults and school-aged youth, while older adults may still not be using the internet as a source of information for activities. Adults with children may get information through their children's schools, while childless adults will be using other outlets. Trusted partner organizations already interacting with these segments of the community can be very useful in disseminating targeting communications for relevant programs and opportunities.

### My Museum Example:

A focus group with NYCHA families revealed parents using the same communication valve as so many New Yorkers looking for things to do with their kids: the Mommy Poppins website. Knowing the Parks Department has a variety of programs good for kids, some parents mentioned checking that website. They are reading reviews on the web, and like any parent, recommendations of others within their community about somewhere being good to bring your family are important.

However, community feedback also indicated that receiving something in the mail, sent home from school or otherwise physically, which could be hung up on the refrigerator or kept handy, was still a very effective communication tool. This prompted the development of informational brochures mailed to the residents in the partner NYCHA communities, including passes and parking vouchers. Another thing to note is to keep the language clear and jargon free. Terms such as *hands on*, *family friendly* or *accessible* all mean different things to different people.

## V. ACKNOWLEDGE DIVERSITY BY SEGMENTING FOCUS

A point raised at our initial advisory council meeting and reiterated in a variety of ways throughout this process is that each community is unique. There is no one "NYCHA" community just as there is no one type of resident.

Knowing the individual community you are working with as well as the intended audiences you want to engage within that community will inform everything from what languages you will want to support to whether you use a paper flier or digital post. Just as you would do with planning for any programming, you will need to focus for an age group, language(s) and give a thought to the best partner to help spread the word.

For example, spending time sending information to school-based parent coordinators for an opportunity hoping to engage seniors will not be as effective as working with another senior support organization to take your fliers around when they do home visits.

### My Museum Example:

Many older residents of NYCHA communities are home-bound or prefer not to travel great distances to attend a program. Finding that they may also have different levels of access and comfort with computer use, distance programs needed to be developed both for internet-based virtual programming and teleconference programs. Collecting information from organizations that already are doing outreach with this age group such as The Community League of the Heights (CLOTH), local senior centers and community centers gave insights into the needs of this population and a way to communicate program opportunities.

## VI. HAVE A STANCE OF WORKING "WITH" NOT "FOR"

Perhaps more important than any other key finding is approaching this work with an attitude of openness, vulnerability and an eye to learning. Building a relationship means listening, a LOT of listening, which can mean hearing some things that are not always pleasant when you have fallen short, but also hearing some things that make your programs better, your institutions better and your staff members better at their jobs. The process of building a relationship with a community is a process of learning together.



## RELATIONSHIPS TAKE TIME

While none of the key findings which came out of our conversations, programming, feedback and partner engagement seem too hard to do, in the reality of the day-to-day rhythm and perpetually understaffed existence of museums and other cultural organizations they can be challenging. Getting to know a community, who lives there, who are the gatekeepers and who are the trusted organizations that would be good partners takes time.

Deploying staff to a site to run programs, go to local meetings and build collaborative partnerships takes time. Translating materials, developing programs that support the needs of segments of the community once they are identified, all take time. While it all also takes money, raising funds to support “outreach” programs which hit a high number of individuals “served” through a series of low-touch, one-shot programs is not as challenging as finding support for the staff time to go and attend PTA meetings or tenant association meetings in order to give them an update on opportunities at your institution and, more importantly, listen to local concerns.

This is the challenge – building a relationship is a long-game. Internal discussions will need to take place about where to target those long-game energies. Do you have enough staff capacity to work with any community anywhere, or should you be looking at the communities within walking distance and really focus on those, building relationships at the hyper-local level? Or do you work on relationships with existing networks whose reach into these communities are established and sure? Regardless, the desire to build the relationships should be genuine, and like any relationship it may not always be easy, but if you are willing to do the work, it is worth it.

### My Museum Example:

While we went in strong with some elements – such as having an education team that understands it is stronger when it reflects the wonderful diversity of New York City – this section could actually be called “examples” of areas for improvement. From hearing that the value of a visit to the Museum wasn’t clear for those who hadn’t come before, even when free entry was on offer, to getting feedback that the entry experience leaves a lot to be desired, with off-putting security magnetometers and other confusing elements, we certainly got some honest feedback. But all of it was terrific for refining and strengthening our programs and the visitor experience for the audiences we are trying to welcome.

### SPECIAL THANKS:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/2008-SPPA.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/NYCHA-Fact-Sheet\\_2020\\_Final.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/NYCHA-Fact-Sheet_2020_Final.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://media4.manhattan-institute.org/sites/default/files/IB-HH-1017-v2.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Demographic-Change-and-the-Future-of-Museums.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Stern, Mark J. and Seifert, Susan C., “The Social Wellbeing of New York City’s Neighborhoods: The Contribution of Culture and the Arts” (2017). Culture and Social Wellbeing in New York City. 1. [https://repository.upenn.edu/siap\\_culture\\_nyc/1](https://repository.upenn.edu/siap_culture_nyc/1)

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