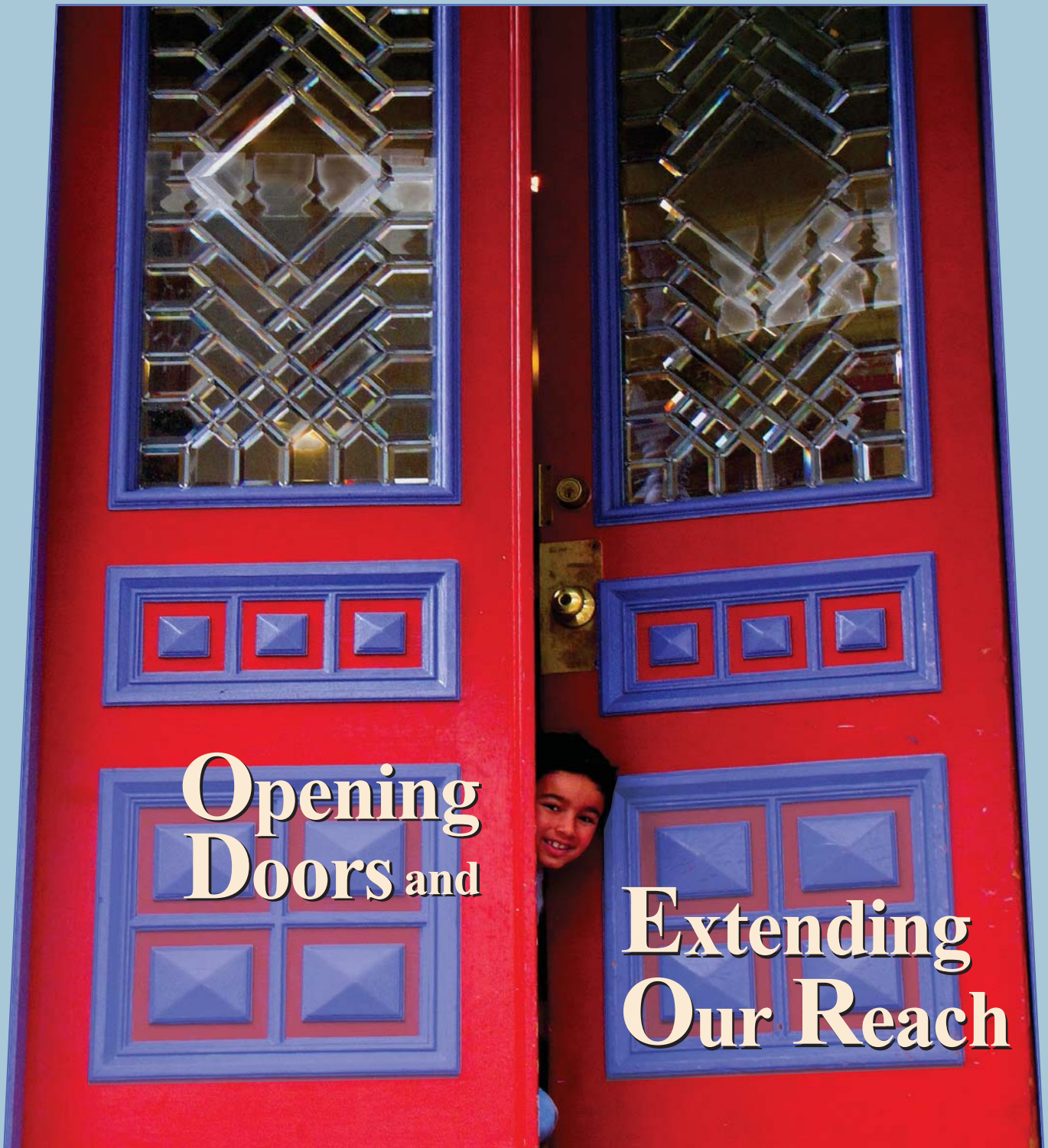




Dimensions

Bimonthly News Journal of the Association of Science-Technology Centers

January/February 2011



Opening
Doors and

Extending
Our Reach



Dimensions

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IN THIS ISSUE

January/February 2011

Science centers and museums are increasingly making the commitment to bring science to all people. Yet there are many reasons why some members of our communities do not typically visit us. In this issue, we look at the many creative ways science centers are overcoming barriers—including cost, location, lack of interest, language and cultural concerns, or perceptions of museums as unwelcoming or inaccessible—to extend their reach to new audiences. By building relationships based on respect and mutual goals, science centers and museums are engaging ever-diversifying audiences in personally relevant ways.

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Cover: Science centers are opening doors to broader audiences through relationship building, creative programming, and institutional commitments to diversity and inclusion.

Photo by Gabriela Maldonado Bell, A.C. Gilbert's Discovery Village.

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To submit news items and ideas for articles, contact Emily Schuster, editor, 202/783-7200 x130; e-mail eschuster@astc.org.

Anthony (Bud) Rock
Chief Executive Officer

Emily Schuster
Editor

Laura Huerta Migus
Rowena Rae
Consulting Editors

Christine Ruffo
Photo Editor

Editorial Advisors

Elsa Bailey
National Science Teachers Association
San Francisco, California, U.S.A.

Rita Deedrick
COSI
Columbus, Ohio, U.S.A.

Colin Johnson
Honorary Member, Ecsite
Cardiff, Wales, U.K.

Ronen Mir
MadaTech
Israel National Museum of Science
Haifa, Israel

Mikko Myllykoski
Heureka, the Finnish Science Centre
Vantaa, Finland

Vishnu Ramcharan
Ontario Science Centre
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Elizabeth Stage
Lawrence Hall of Science
University of California
Berkeley, California, U.S.A.

Contributors

Carol Lynn Alpert

Kate Crawford

Barbara Flagg

Diane Friendak

Cecilia Garibay

Margaret Glass

Stephanie Lenox

Laura Huerta Migus

Elizabeth E. Merritt

Azuka I. MuMin

Vishwamitra Oree

Rowena Rae

Vishnu Ramcharan

Anthony (Bud) Rock

Nurit Snir

Erik Stengler

It's a Wonderful Gift: *Mutuality in Community Engagement*

By Vishnu Ramcharan

In Frank Capra's 1946 film *It's a Wonderful Life*, we see an example of an idealized relationship between a community and an institution. The people of Bedford Falls rise up to save George Bailey's savings-and-loan company—an institution that has long been a part of their aspirations for themselves and future generations. This community engagement was the outcome of people acting out of a sense of common *purpose*. I think there's a lesson for science centers in this story.

The Ontario Science Centre is located in Toronto's Flemingdon Park ("Flemo") district, a neighborhood recognized by the city as a priority area for improved youth services and community safety. But when it comes to access to a science center, one would think that this area should not be considered "underserved." We are just across the street, for heaven's sake. And we want them to come! Our Community Access Program provides thousands of free passes annually. Yet the evidence from the Admissions Front Desk suggests there must be other barriers that inhibit a stroll across the street and through our doors. We've realized that having the means to go somewhere isn't sufficient; we need to have a reason and a purpose for true engagement to begin.

Asking the right questions

Science centers may ask themselves, "What are our reasons for bringing the community into our institution, and what are their reasons for not coming?" But framing the issue in this way invites blame ("Who erected the barriers?") instead of a call to action ("How can we work together to overcome these barriers?")

Reframing the questions can lead to a dizzying self-examination of institutional

values and assumptions: "Are we truly interested in building deeper relationships with our neighbors, or are we just trying to change our demographic statistics or boost attendance? Why are community relationships important? Are they as important to our local neighborhood as they are to us?" And perhaps the toughest question: "Who is not being 'reached'—'them' or 'us'?"

Although the Ontario Science Centre has been working with Flemingdon Park for the past 20 years, we began asking ourselves these hard questions just four years ago. We have now come to recognize that we are a part of, not apart from, Flemingdon Park, and our goals have shifted from "doing for" to "doing with" our community.

Having the means to go somewhere isn't sufficient; we need to have a reason and a purpose for true engagement to begin.

This internal self-reflection was a preamble to ongoing formal and informal conversations with our neighbors. As a result, we're working with the community on several projects that advance a common purpose, including a youth-run farmer's market, job fairs, school science nights, a local radio station, and the youth-produced film *The Real Flemo*, which contrasts with the negative portrayal of the neighborhood in the media.

Approaches to community engagement

We are now in the process of establishing an institutional strategy for community engagement, which includes three approaches:

1) **Be stubborn in viewing the community through the lens of its assets.** The science center and its community represent two sets of assets, coming together to address common needs and goals. We have started to forge authentic partnerships, rather than parrot the social service model.

2) **Never do for others what they can and should do for themselves.** While we may help organize programs, provide tools, and even help provoke the issues, *the community must lead us*. Our neighborhood is proud of what it has to offer; it doesn't see itself as a liability in need of a program.

3) **Listen.** By listening to our neighbors, we've realized we don't need to reinvent new resources and departments, but rather think differently about how we apply our assets, including facilities, equipment, staff talents, financial resources, and political clout.

Instead of holding the gift up and shaking it to see if we could guess what was inside, we listened and let the gift givers tell us which string to pull to open the box. To our surprise, we discovered that the gift we had exchanged with the community was the gift of each other. That's the lesson George Bailey learned. And it's pretty wonderful. ■

Vishnu Ramcharan is project lead, visitor and community engagement, at the Ontario Science Centre, Toronto, Canada.