

I'm Still KNOCKING...



Columnist: Sarah Sewell

In the search for the elusive full-time career in the museum field, making sure you have the right education and skill-set is no easy feat. Whether you are trying to find that first job, or looking to update your skill-set as a mid-career professional, professional development is key at all stages. But where does one go to get those skills? What skills should you be getting?



This column will seek to address these concerns from my perspective, (a determined museum professional, with 4 different part-time jobs, only one actually in a museum), but I hope professionals at all stages of their careers will be able to learn something here as well. After all, one of the great things about our field is the collaboration and sharing of information that occurs.

Getting More Than a Foot in the Door

In the last issue, I shared the thoughts of two professionals well into their careers. Now, I have spoken with two up and coming professionals about their experiences and what they are doing to make themselves stand out. I've asked Mary Elizabeth Harrison and Sandra Borger to be as honest as possible, knowing that their current and future employers would be reading this article. Both shared some great insights and experiences many of us 'up and comers' can relate to.

Going into this process, I thought there would be a gap between what employers were looking for and what potential employees had to offer. I think something different came out of the discussion, which I hope you will see too.

Mary Elizabeth Harrison: "After graduating from the University of Victoria with a BA in Art History in 2010, I've worked in and out of the arts sector trying to secure a position that's more than just an entry-level job. Today I work for the Vancouver Maritime Museum as their Collections Associate and Visitor Services Assistant. I also work at the Vancouver Art Gallery in visitor services. A few other places I've worked and volunteered for are: the Arts Council of New Westminster, the Delta Museum and Archives Society, the Federation for Canadian Artists, Art Relief International, the Arts Club Theatre Company, and the Van Dop Art Gallery."

Sandra Borger: "I am currently the Education Specialist at the Surrey Museum, and so I deal with students coming for field trips to the Museum, as well as summer day camps in July and August. Previously I worked at the Surrey Museum as the Public Programmer. In between these two positions, I went off to have a child and a year of maternity leave. When my mat leave was nearing the end, the person in the education department was about to

retire, and I thought it would be a good chance for me to do something different. Previous to that, I worked part time for the Maple Ridge Museum and the Pitt Meadows Museum, mostly with tours, research and some exhibit work.”

What education (museum and otherwise) do you have?

Mary Elizabeth Harrison: “Besides my Bachelors Degree, I am currently enrolled in my second year of studies with UVic’s Cultural Resource Management Degree.”

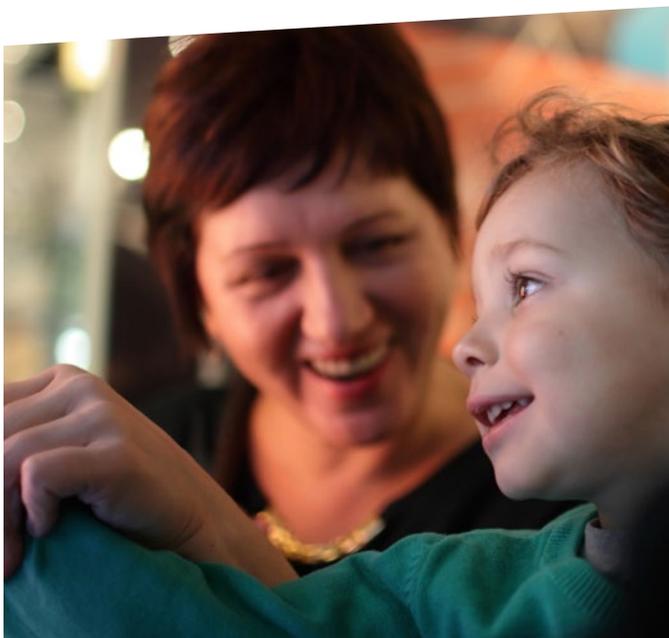
Sandra Borger: “I have a BA from Simon Fraser University, as well as a MA in History from Simon Fraser. I also have a Certificate in teaching adults from SFU, and am almost done my Diploma in Cultural Resource Management at UVic.”

What have you done to make yourself stand out to potential employers?

Mary Elizabeth Harrison: “What I’ve realized in the museums world is you must take advantage of every opportunity you are given, volunteer or paid, because any skill you can master is transferrable and will give

you an edge. You need to start teaching yourself how to do a mail merge, or watching tutorials of Photoshop and using E-Tapestry, because the more you know the more valuable you are. Plus, your day will run smoother and you will build your confidence. In short, being a team player and being efficient are skills I’ve built up to secure a job.”

Sandra Borger: “While there are museums with bigger budgets and more staff in BC, so many are small and run by historical societies. In these places, there are only one or two staff who have to be the curator, the archivist, the programmer, the janitor, the marketing person and so forth. Early in my career I tried to get as much varied experience as possible, so that I could say confidently in an interview that I have experience in all those aspects of museum work. I’ve gone out of my way to ask supervisors to work on projects that are outside the realm of my experience to gain that knowledge. Any time that I could not get paid for those experiences, I went looking to volunteer work that would help me fill the void. For example, I have now been volunteering with the Langley Heritage Society for five years. I’ve been on the board of directors, the editor of their monthly newsletter, helped



Above left and right: Museum visitors explore exhibits.
Photo credit: Getty images.

with school program planning and lined up speakers for monthly meetings.”

Do you feel that the museum specific courses you have taken adequately prepared you for the job? Or is there a lot of on the job training that takes place?

Mary Elizabeth Harrison: “Yes, I think they do put you ahead of the game. What I’ve found tricky is sometimes what I am learning in school about how an ideal museum operates isn’t always welcome in an organization that is just trying to stay afloat. I think on the job training depends on a lot of factors: funding; when you were hired; how organized your predecessor was; the mentality and mission of the organization, etc. The best thing to do is connect with other museum and art professionals, take classes, go to conferences and read a lot. If you are truly someone who sees museums as a catalyst for dialogue, community togetherness and you want to grow and get ahead, don’t wait for someone to show you the ropes.”

Sandra Borger: “The courses that I have taken in museum studies have been great for thinking about museums, what they are, what they stand for, how they are evolving and how they generally run, but overall, I would say that most of my job training has taken place at the museums I have worked in. Each museum is so different, and has different ways of doing things, that you are often learning the same type of thing, such as accessioning, but in a different way (one museum might use excel as their database, another will use MINISIS, and so forth).”

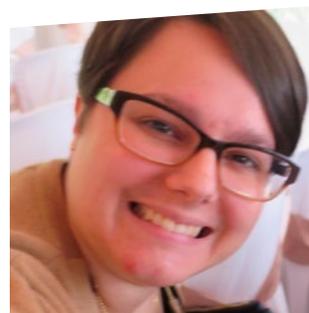
Finally, is there anything you would like to share with the readers about your experience in the field so far?

Mary Elizabeth Harrison: “Network, network, network! A lot of organizations will promote from within, and you will therefore not see a posting so reach out to HR and ask to be put on a waitlist if possible. George W. McDaniel wrote an essay in 1999 entitled “At Historic Houses and Buildings: Connecting Past, Present and Future”, which really hits a lot of issues, topics, and trends that I think about on a daily basis. One of his most interesting

suggestions will save you a lot of exasperation: when you go for your interview, ask the director and staff how they feel about their mission statement and the actions they’ve taken to uphold it. The answers they give you will tell you everything you need to know about the organization’s growth, mentality and innovation.”

Sandra Borger: “Making connections is really important in this field. The more conferences and meetings you can go to, the better you will be, especially when you are first starting out. Meeting people and making a good first impression on managers who may interview you for a job in the future puts you ahead of other candidates before you walk through the door. If you are in a small building with only one other staff member, you may need to reach out to other museums and museum professionals to ask for help and advice. I have yet to meet someone who works in a museum that does not want to help their peers. We are a small and tight knit community. I can’t imagine doing anything else with my life!”

I would like to thank Harrison and Borger for their time and honesty. It is quite clear getting a job in our field takes time, hard work and patience. I think it can be easy for many people, myself included, to become disheartened while searching for that elusive job. Positions are hard to come by, and the competition is stiff. But that also gives me hope for the museums of the future. A very well educated and dedicated group of professionals are getting in place to take our museums into the future – As long as those already well into their careers keep sharing their knowledge and employers keep giving people a chance and also make themselves open to new ideas.



Left: Sandra Borger



Right: Mary Elizabeth Harrison