

MARK WRIGHT

KAREN BROSIUS

And I would now like to introduce Mark Wright, who is going to talk about what he sees as some of the key and instrumental issues that are facing museums today.

MARK WRIGHT

Thank you, uh, Karen. I want to also thank Dr. Radice and, uh, Marsha Semmel and, and the full staff of IMLS. I'm honored to be a part of this conversation. I look out into the audience and read some of my colleagues' bios and, you know, I understand that this is about peer-to-peer. So, one of things I was thinking about before coming here was my intent not to retell stories or opine on things about which most of us have been thinking for at least five to 10 or 15 years now. And so, I hope that these few thoughts are helpful as we try to crystallize you know, our collective thinking. And I'm most concerned about the next steps like what we will do after today, whether we are going to be forming some new alliances of people who are in this room, some of whom know each other. I don't know probably more than half of the people in here and that's, to me, something I need to work on. So, with that, I also want to acknowledge, Mr. Dilenschneider's talk last night as well as Dr. Starr. Both of them gave thoughts that resonated with me. There were a couple that Dr. Starr gave in his introduction last evening that kind of made me think more focused about some of the issues that I might want to focus on. Given that it seems that as far as museums are concerned I'm carrying a bit of that responsibility. So, I don't want to sell my discipline short. One of the things Dr. Starr said that is incumbent upon museums last night is, among other things, to correct deficiencies. And that is thinking about those things that face us societally as, in terms of problems, things like literacy, world health, health and well-being. But then I thought, from an institutional level, about what some of those deficiencies are as well. I first started in museums really in 1989 at the Valentine Museum in Richmond as an intern. And I remember it was a great place to start because I was a young Black male working in an institution that had a deep history. And quite frankly, you know, confederate preservation, although it's next-door neighbor was the Museum Of the Confederacy. So comparatively speaking, they were quite to the left. (LAUGH) I put that out there to say that that was sort of the grounding for me in terms of what some of the issues that face museums are. Because when you talk about some of the things that Rob mentioned in terms of donor basis, you're really talking about the institution being able to communicate its value to people across sectors, across demographics, and even within its, its own community of other institutions. So, that conversation is one that, I think has, has happened increasingly over the last decade. But I think that's an issue that faces museums today if we talk about museums communicating their relevance and their value so that that resonance is not staged. It's not something that falls solely squarely on the shoulders of the development department or the CEO. It is one that has to permeate the institution in terms of having mechanisms within the institution that actually illustrate, demonstrate your values as an institution so that you're able then to come together periodically. It might be through retreats. It might be through participation and really collective thinking about how you're going to present yourself as an institution to your colleagues. If you're going to be attending regional meetings, national meetings, what are the issues you're going to take to the table? So, I found in my experience as a funder prior to being at the National Museum, of the National Children's Museum, that many institutions sell themselves short. The idea that your assets are limited to your spreadsheets and not necessarily to be included in terms of collections, let's say, a lot of institutions don't realize that if you've got 95 percent of your holdings in storage at any one time that there are other institutions that find value in that. And so, to be able to, to have opportunities to communicate what your assets are to the rest of your colleagues really raises the bar in terms of what you can then say to potential donors in terms of, hey, this is who our institution is outside of our local community, outside of our tourism value. We represent a real value to the community of cultural institutions and learning institutions. And then, at that level, I think, you're then able to turn to a potential donor and say, we

represent a quality of life. Um, and, and there, then what lies, I think, for some institutions that are beginning to sort of open your eyes and start to think much less from a self-preservation sort of perspective and more about expanding your value. So, the question stops being how is it we can raise this money and starts becoming how can we increase our impact. And I think that that is a sort of a world view that institutions are beginning to embrace, and I'd like to see that increase. So that social utility factor is, is big. I think also for institutions certainly in the case of the National Children's Museum, which will open some time around 2010 at the National Harbor, a little shameless plug there. But (LAUGH) I think it's relevant in a way because my work right now is very much steeped in, in sort of this crossover between theory and practice, given that we are serving publics prior to opening. We are demonstrating our value on a local level, and that we are aimed as to inspire young people to care about and improve our world. So to do that, we're taking a multi-pronged whole child, whole community approach. And so we are in a unique position right now to be emerging at a time when museums have been introspective for a long time. I won't try to say it began with, you know, current generation museum people coming in museums. That will be foolish. But we're, we're fortunate that we can begin to conceive of an institution from the ground up relative to our mission. So, if we're talking about inspiring young people to care about and improve the world, it's incumbent upon us to demonstrate that in our planning process. For instance, thinking about sustainable architecture, engaging young people in the process of planning the museum, is something that we have an opportunity to do. And then, we begin thinking about, and Rob made this point as well, I'm not sure if he was thinking to this extreme level, But when you start about, talk about starting younger, we're looking at our audience which is from six months to 12 as the next generation of museum people, both as workers and as champions. So, there are so many opportunities from a children's museum. Which is a large reason why I decided to re-enter museums through the lens of children's museums, because I thought that was the single greatest problem that museums have today, which is establishing in the consciousness of our young people the value of cultural institutions. So that they feel a sense of ownership in them and it's not something that they acquire through school field trips or in the case of the select few through only family trips to the museum, which is the ideal situation, I think. To me that's the goal that, you know, a family will have in its top five activities to do on a weekend to go to a museum somewhere. And hopefully, these children when they have their own families will have that internalized. So that is a part of forward thinking on, I think as well. And then there's the more practical issue I think that we as the National Children Museum, but many institutions are doing by default and by requirement. And that is to stay current with emerging technologies in every way and that they can affect and inform museum work. And that includes everything from operational applications, terms of visitor services, to also things like collections management and access, because accessibility is one of the things that technology has really enhanced in museums over the last 15 years or so. And it's a place where I think libraries, and we had a good talk about this last night, Melanie and I at dinner. But I think libraries, in my view and perhaps in the view of many others, have been ahead of the curve in terms of the use of technology to facilitate accessibility to intellectual assets and collections. Now that might be more from a sort of traditionalist approach, and that is, yes, you're using a computer to find out where things are. But then there's another layer to it that I think museums have begun to engage in, and in part, through some of the work that I was able to be a part of, the Museum Loan Network in Cambridge at MIT. The idea that folks can come to a central location, identify collections that are available for a loan from multiple institutions, can then engage in conversations with those institutions. Not only about the potential to borrow those objects, but about the ideas that are resident in those objects. And therein I think lies the sort of intangible value of museums in general, particularly those that are collections-based, is that they are a place that can foster individual growth, introspection. They can serve as a place. And everybody knows these things, so I'm sort of reiterating the obvious. But for a reason, and that is that, I think, museums have to now become external with this understanding the idea that to do the act, to perform the act of externalizing your understandings about your value is one thing, and then the other thing is to communicate it. And I think that that's what is actually, at the least from my perspective, a lot of what Mr. Dilenschneider was talking about last night was about this real communicating. I don't think there are many of us in the room last night that didn't understand them. We had a role and the capacity to make

change and to affect the quality of life of, for people and also to, to be a place for discourse. But I do think that they're, for me anyway, that the big piece was and remains, that is a part of our training across disciplines within museums, collections people, curators, directors, future trustees have to begin to think about how they're communicating their value to colleagues. So, there are some opportunities with that. And I think that as museums begin to identify what their assets are their ability then to go out and identify partners, both in terms of corporate partners, community partners becomes enriched. And so your task is not about competition for resources and assets, but how large is the circle of people who are doing the ask I think becomes the question. So, it's one pot for the whole as opposed to I'm going up against my local library for this donor or for that grant. And IMLS nonetheless thankfully is modeling this behavior from a grant-making perspective, which is a huge piece of it as well. It's the policy-makers and the grant-makers on, in many cases, are increasingly supporting any disciplinary collaboration and partnering. So, it is my hope that we can continue to, to make advances in this way. Thank you.

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