AGNS Docents Present Project in St. Louis

Our committed group of volunteers, approximately 30 docents, meets every Monday morning from September to June to engage in school program planning and tour design as well as art study. For the past few years Art Gallery of Nova Scotia docents and staff have examined the trend of declining numbers of high school students taking part in our tours program. This had been identified as a critical issue to support the AGNS mission “To bring people and art together” and Priority 4 of the Core Business Curatorial Program “A refreshed and concerted effort will be made to target schools and increase class visits to the gallery.”

In 2009, three AGNS docents returned from the National Docent Symposium (NDS) in Toronto extolling the idea-exchange forum provided there. A team of three other docents, working with AGNS and the larger docent group, investigated how we might use the NDS 2011 in St. Louis as a catalyst to formalize our concerns regarding declining enrolments and seek possible solutions. We wrote a successful submission for the NDS Showcase of Ideas highlighting this question: For the social networking generation who expect personal connections to everything and the ability to star in their own story always, how can we entice them to bring their group to our gallery? Selecting the title “Hooking the Unhookable,” our team combined the diverse expertise of the docent group to develop an engaging showcase presentation.

A review of the evaluations completed by all teachers who bring students to the gallery quickly convinced the docents and AGNS staff that the students are not unhookable at all. In fact, once they get to the gallery students invariably have a great experience with the art. In-gallery focus groups and interviews with teachers and administrators in high schools provided the additional evidence we needed to proceed.

We determined that the “unhookable” applies not to tech-savvy teenagers (they love face to face conversations around original art pieces) but to teachers facing a barrage of institutional barriers. For any teacher wanting to take a class outside school, there is a gauntlet of issues to surmount. They must handle all the safety concerns, bussing arrangements, chaperone requirements, permissions from the principal and parents, curriculum justifications, gallery requirements, and, of course, finding the funds for admission. To meet our goal of getting more high school students to the AGNS we determined the need to develop and implement strategies which would help teachers give their students a curriculum that extends beyond the classroom.

The NDS in St. Louis allowed us the opportunity to share our findings, engage with an informed group of docents from the US and Canada, reflect on others’ experiences and begin a process for building on what we had learned there. So where are we now? Back home at the AGNS our docent group and AGNS staff have begun implementing many of the great ideas learned from our preparation and from the symposium itself. We are already designing new tours with strong curriculum connections and enriching docent toolkits with great interactive activities for student tours.

As a postscript you might ask what is the hook that enticed three retired teachers to meet two or three times each week, fund their own way to an international conference, and return anxious to continue the process. Our answer: we have fallen in love with the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia collection and we want to share it with every student in the province. As a bonus, the docent program offers a life-long learning opportunity that makes this volunteer experience the best gig in town.

Judy Ballah
Docent, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

John Devlin

John Devlin came to the Gallery as a volunteer in 1989 from the Department of Community Services, under a program called Project 50, which helps people living with mental illness to make a meaningful contribution to a chosen organization. From the outset John has been a very conscientious and capable volunteer in the Development Office, making friends and earning the respect of Gallery staff.

John graduated from TUNS in architecture and then studied theology at St Edmund’s, Cambridge. A bout of mental illness forced him to leave his beloved surroundings and return to Nova Scotia. Over the years his interest in and memories of the beauty of the architecture of the colleges of Cambridge have inspired him to write poetry and articles describing its ethos. This was very much a part of John’s healing and finding wellness. His writing led to the creation of fanciful architectural drawings, 22 of which were selected for an exhibit at the Arts Centre, King’s College, Cambridge (as was reported in a previous Journal). A chance visit to the Gallery by two art patrons Lizzie Alice Robinson and Dylan Spencer-Davidson led to the idea realized in an exhibition book called Nova Cantabrigiensis, published by Island Editions and launched at Eye Level Gallery in July 2011.

In 2003 John helped form the Cambridge Society of Nova Scotia. His service as its secretary has been valuable. “John’s organizational skills and computer expertise keep the members connected, both locally and with the International Cambridge Societies,” adds Joe MacDowall OBE, president of the Society.

John is optimistic about what the future holds and plans to explore and develop other interests. His continuous commitment to the Gallery is admirable. AGNS is fortunate to have John as a volunteer and friend.

Nova Cantabrigiensis is available for purchase at the Gallery Shop and at Eye Level Gallery.

Elizabeth Ryan
Volunteer, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia