Guest column: Museums have mission to serve, educate

Today is National Museum Advocacy Day, and it's an excellent time to express support for your local institutions.

By Mallory Bader, Special to The Commercial Appeal

Tuesday, February 28, 2012

In tough economic times, government officials trying to balance their budgets often consider cutting funds for cultural institutions such as museums. Some view museums as luxuries we cannot afford. However, museums are much more than warehouses filled with objects. They are places where change occurs and lives are transformed.

I believe the museums that continue to flourish despite tough times are those that embrace their communities and address the challenges of our times. Instead of simply being repositories for "stuff," public museums have a mission to serve, educate and empower our citizens.

Museums serve the public by providing fun and engaging educational opportunities. According to the American Association of Museums, museums spend $2.2 billion a year on education alone. At least 22 percent of our nation's museums are located in rural areas and act as a primary educational voice for a community's cultural heritage. Many are surprised to learn there are more than 75 museums in West Tennessee alone, most located outside of Memphis.

Museums can engage with communities to tackle a variety of issues that are debated in the political forum and affect our everyday lives. Nationally, discussions through the AAM's Center for the Future of Museums take up issues such as local food movements, sustainability and human rights, to name a few. The National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis is at the forefront of local and national discussions on human rights and social inequalities not just of the past, but of the present and into the future.

One way that museums can be centers for social change is through education. More than ever before, museums work in collaboration with schools to meet students' educational needs. The idea of a "participatory museum" means more than just hands-on activities; it means a museum where the students and other visitors help to create the experience. Students now have an active role in their museum experiences and develop critical thinking skills while engaging interactively with the subject matter.
At the C.H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, we provide K-12 students with engaging educational opportunities that are tied to a school's curriculum standards. For example, students and other visitors have participated in the creation of our new outdoor exhibits such as the Traditional Medicinal Plant Sanctuary. When completed the exhibit will serve as an educational tool for visitors to discuss the role of traditional plants in the lives of the prehistoric Native Americans who lived at Chucalissa. The exhibit will also serve as a model for preserving and conserving medicinal plants for future generations of Memphians.

At Chucalissa, we are working to better address the needs of our community. For example, in redesigning the museum's exhibit hall, we are going well beyond simply updating our exhibit cases. We are involving the public by holding focus groups and interviews with teachers, community members, archaeologists and Native Americans to help determine the content of our museum exhibits.

Museums now tell stories and build exhibits that paint a larger and more inclusive picture of our society. These stories often deal with people who have been marginalized or issues that are politically charged. Museums must become socially responsible and connect to the communities they serve, or else they will become irrelevant.

Institutions such as the C.H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa and the Pink Palace Family of Museums are publicly owned. Blockbuster exhibits and tax dollars alone will not keep these museum doors open. To be successful, the public must take an active role in defining what museums are to become. This crucial connection cannot happen without museum visitors being advocates and voicing their support of museums to our government officials.

Today is National Museum Advocacy Day -- an excellent time to express that support. Remember, like libraries, schools and other public institutions, museums are meant to serve the public, but the public must also support and serve those institutions.

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