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Project manager of family programs at Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 2013

**"One is less afraid of that, which one knows"
Traditional Folk Culture as Agent of Social Change**

Every year the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. (U.S.A.) organizes a large-scale open air festival: "The Smithsonian Folklife Festival is an international exposition of living cultural heritage annually produced outdoors on the National Mall of the United States in Washington, D.C., by the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. The Festival takes place for two weeks every summer. It is an educational presentation that features community-based cultural exemplars. Free to the public, each Festival typically draws more than one million visitors." In the summer of 2013, the Festival's featured country was Hungary.

I was asked to create a family activity area that would comprise an integral element of the Festival, where children and adults would have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with Hungarian culture in a way that was both entertaining and educational.



The festival itself is a celebration of diversity in that every year it showcases both foreign cultures and domestic subcultures on a vast swath of open space in the nation's capitol, thereby raising awareness and fostering an understanding of others. My goal with the creation of the family activity program and corresponding printed guide was to deepen this experience for visitors and make it more personal. Motivated by the concept that one is less afraid of that, which one knows, I strove to create an experience using

methods of participatory pedagogy I practice on a daily basis, in which both children and adults would have the opportunity to “walk in the shoes of others” through play.



I therefore wrote a story about two siblings, a little boy and his older sister, who set out on foot with their mother to visit their father who is a herdsman living on the Great Plain of Hungary. Along the way they meet interesting people who teach them interesting things. These people were the craftspeople at the Festival, whose stalls were numbered according to the directions in the guide booklet. At each stall visitors participated in an activity, its relevance to Hungarian folk culture explained by both the craftspeople themselves and in the booklet. With the completion of each activity participants were awarded a paper “peacock feather.” Twelve feathers could be collected, which at the conclusion of the activity series were assembled into a fan bearing the logo of the Festival (peacock) on one side and facts about Hungary on the other.



The activities visitors participated in all carried information on various aspects of Hungary and traditional folk culture: folk costumes, architecture, cuisine, art, music, traditional peasant lifestyle and work, Hungary’s geography etc. Since visitors were involved they received information indirectly, experiencing it rather than merely learning of it. While following the guide’s directions participants visited every area of the festival, even those that were not a part of the family activities area. All means and materials used

during the course of the activities were authentic and of high quality, as the usage of materials that are excellent and of good quality is an indication of respect towards both the culture under discovery and the visitor. Some examples of this: The folk costumes participants dressed up in were authentic pieces, not reproductions; The woodcarvings participants made rubbings of were made by a master craftsman of a 16th century Transylvanian furniture maker dynasty; The wall painting participants emulated were prepared by a Master of Folk Art.



Visitors to the festival were from all strata of society and all age groups. In the morning hours hundreds of children attending local day camps (often from disadvantaged inner city areas) spent hours at the Festival and Family Activity Area, while in the afternoon and on weekends nuclear and extended families comprised the majority of visitors. They were exposed to several themes of diversity during the completion of the activity series, such as city vs. country life, past vs. present, rich vs. poor, peasant lifestyle vs. that of industrialized urban areas, life in Europe vs. life in the USA, generational and gender differences. The cooperative activities provided ample opportunity to explore similarities as well as differences between cultures and lifestyles, both between the culture under discovery (Hungarian) and that of the participants, as well as between the various cultures of the participants themselves.



In the development of the guide booklet’s story, its related activities and the “reward” received for participation (fan) I strove to create a public education opportunity equally attainable to and enjoyable by all, where through exposure to, the experiencing of, and the “trying on” of another culture participants can learn about Hungary with the aim of fostering an understanding and acceptance of other cultures and individuals, ultimately resulting in the awakening of interest and curiosity towards one another as a prerequisite to enabling positive social change.

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