Museum CEO: ‘At no time did we consider canceling’ Pride events, even after backlash

By Patricia D. Wellenbach
FOR THE INQUIRER

For cultural organizations, committing to diversity and inclusion requires a willingness to put some things at risk. The reaction of funders, audiences, and public opinion may cause backlash and impact revenue. Staff and board may be challenged. Missions may be questioned.

The fundamental question is: How much are we willing to risk to lead by example and make lasting change around diversity and inclusion?

Last week, at Please Touch Museum (PTM), that question was front and center for us when we received some pushback to our scheduled programming for Pride Month.

We believe that PTM should embrace all communities and create programming and experiences that reflect the diversity of the children and families we welcome. That’s exactly why we hosted a Pride Family Festival this weekend, which included collaborative art projects, mural painting and Drag Queen Storytime.

The program announcement prompted some negative responses, especially on Facebook where people wrote things such as “inappropriate to subject children of these ages to things like this.”

PTM’s decision on Pride was never in doubt. We created the program specifically for children and families. We knew there was potential for negative reactions. We worked with leaders in the LGBTQ community on outreach strategies and messaging. We trained staff and kept the board informed on the plans.

The Philadelphia region is deeply diverse. At PTM, we believe that cultural institutions can help build bridges between communities through inclusive programming. Our families and communities reflect a broad array of ethnicities, religions, and gender identification and sexual orientations. There are individuals and families dealing with physical and emotional disabilities, and others impacted by disparities in education, and social and economic status.

At PTM, this weekend’s Pride events were only the latest programming designed to create community. In 2016, we expanded our investment to engage diverse communities with programs like Juneteenth, Holi, Sukkot, Kwanza, and others. Last fall we hosted events for Coming Out Week. The Cultural Alliance has called on the arts and culture sector to action on diversity, equity and inclusion. But they caution: “Real change only happens when a community comes together around common values. Organizations, artists, funders and audiences must all be involved, each contributing in ways small and large to the movement.” We try to live that daily.

In the end, we may have lost some members and we may have sacri-
ficed revenue, but at no time did we consider canceling the program. We held fast in our commitment to create a day that children and families would experience with joy and openness. More than 1,600 visitors participated in Pride.

The essence of the day was captured in a comment from a husband and wife: “We thought it would be a great way to introduce our daughter to her first Pride event. We want her to grow up experiencing different ways to express herself and to see it as normal, to be proud of who she is and to accept and love other people the way they are.”

The impact of Pride on board and staff was my “aha” moment. They are inspired, and believe we did something remarkable. They have a greater sense of purpose about our work. On balance the risks of lost revenue and some negative press was no match for the rewards. A community that feels accepted and valued and an organization that is energized for the next challenge may be the ultimate statement of what diversity and inclusion can really achieve.

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