

## Holocaust Museum Houston: Finding My Place In The Museum World

One of the primary reasons that I was drawn to the University of Houston's Master's in public history program was the ability to participate in multiple internships as a part of the curriculum. At this stage in my education, I strongly felt that I was ready to focus on the practical and skill-based sides of working in the field. On the non-thesis track, I am required to complete two internships. Early on in my graduate coursework, I started exploring the Museum District in Houston and thinking about what museums I might like to work at. I was drawn to Holocaust Museum Houston after attending a workshop run by the university's Center for Public History. I had the chance to listen to staff from multiple departments talk about their roles in the institution and take a tour of the main galleries with docents of the museum. I loved how thoughtful the Holocaust gallery was laid out, a simultaneously chronological and thematic path that was similar, but distinctly unique from my visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. I was particularly fascinated by the Human Rights gallery, which connects the Holocaust to other human rights issues that occurred after World War II and in some cases, ones that are continuing in the present.

I applied to, interviewed for, and was accepted quickly to the Holocaust Museum's internship program, specifically for Visitor and Volunteer Services. This department is responsible for running all of the day-to-day tasks on the museum floor, including selling tickets, managing permanent and temporary exhibit galleries, selling merchandise in the museum store, and scheduling and overseeing school and group tours. Additionally, they supervise all the volunteers that they heavily rely on to help accomplish these tasks, as there are only four staff members in this department for all seven days of the week. I had previously completed a few internships in the historical or museum-related fields, but working in the front-of-house areas of a museum was

a completely foreign concept to me. I hoped to improve my customer service skills and learn about how various departments work on their separate projects and tasks that all move around each other in different ways and also come together to collaborate. Over the course of my internship, I accomplished all of these goals and more by interacting with and learning from staff members from different departments, drawing on my public history coursework to guide my job tasks, and continuing the evolution of skills I picked up through other internships and job experiences.

My first lessons in running a museum came from the floor with the Visitor and Volunteer staff. On my first day, I learned to run the point-of-sale (POS) system used at both the front desk and the store within the first few minutes of my internship before immediately being put to work at the admissions desk. The admissions desk is a visitor's first point of contact in the museum.

Visitors buy their tickets or get checked in for the museum's free hours between 2 and 5 pm on Thursday afternoons, and they often pick up visitor guides or ask questions about what to expect. They can also purchase audio guides, which provide additional information not included in the text panels and object labels in the different galleries. Additionally, the admissions desk is the place where important donors or guests as well as school groups check in. Throughout my internship, this position would fluctuate between being slow where people trickle in through the day, a steady pace where one would need to pay close attention to the front door while working on other tasks, or chaos where the museum was packed and there were lines at each of the computers. A person needs to be quick on their feet to switch gears, depending on the day and the guest in front of them.

The admissions desk became my most frequently assigned location after the first couple of weeks. Although it was nerve-racking at first, I slowly built speed and ease with both the POS

system and the greeting of visitors. Before this internship, I had never worked in any kind of customer service position where it is one's job to always be 'on'. I learned that people are put at ease when they enter the museum if they see a smiling face and receive a 'welcome.' Most people think that because a Holocaust Museum is meant to be a solemn and reflective space, it means that people cannot display joy or positivity in general. The coordinators taught me otherwise, and I soon saw how people tended to relax if you greeted them properly and were not as uncomfortable with the topic of the museum afterward. Additionally, during my time in this position, I learned how to answer the phone professionally. While all the other tasks assigned to this role are happening simultaneously, the front desk phone rings intermittently throughout the day. It is an even mix between visitors and potential visitors looking for answers to their questions, important people looking to be transferred to one of the departments upstairs, and spam calls and solicitors. I have never liked answering the phone from or making phone calls to businesses because I always felt like I was stumbling over my words or worried I would ask my question incorrectly. However, I soon developed a script for answering the Holocaust Museum's phone and memorized the important answers to visitors' most frequently asked questions about hours, parking, and prices. I nailed down a routine with all these different elements in place, and soon, the coordinators found that they could leave me alone at the desk and move on to other responsibilities without worrying about me as they would other volunteers.

One area of my public history coursework that I had frequent interaction with while working admissions was museum accessibility. Visitors who are looking for accommodations or answers related to accommodations always make a stop at the front desk. Museum accessibility was one of the major weekly topics of my Museum Programming course in the Arts Leadership department this spring. I read several articles on what different museums are doing to

accommodate people with different types of physical and mental needs, including improving wheelchair access, offering documents and labels in Braille, and creating tours that accommodate those with different learning styles. Holocaust Museum Houston has some of the best accessibility offerings that I have seen in a modern museum. All text panels, object labels, visitor guides, videos, and audio tour guides offer both English and Spanish material and/or captions. The museum has a wheelchair that is available for use if a guest requires one, and those who claim accessibility needs of any kind at the desk can receive free admission and often, a free audio guide as well. The museum even offers American Sign Language handheld guides, though I never got to see them used. In my future career, if I have input on any accessibility issues, I want to advocate for the types of solutions implemented at the Holocaust Museum. It made a noticeable difference for the majority of our visitors who utilized the accommodations.

Outside of admissions, I was also frequently assigned to the museum store. The store operates similarly to the admissions desk; it utilizes the same POS system, and visitors are often wandering in to browse or ask questions. People would usually trickle through intermittently, and most days, there would only be a small handful of sales. The main exception to this was when school groups were scheduled. Most of the students who were visiting the museum wanted to buy something to remember the experience by, and because of the way tour groups were set up, the store would often receive a large group of ten to twenty students all at once. It is sometimes chaotic in such a tight space, but I loved those days. I would interact with students about what they saw in the museum and answer questions about store items. Occasionally, I would make a recommendation on what to buy based on similar experiences of finding something small to remember a museum visit in my childhood. The hardest part of working in the store for me was the frequency of the inventory rotations and the locations of the bar codes.

Not every item has a barcode sticker on it, so sometimes the cashier must flip through a price book to find the right item to scan. Because the inventory rotated based on which special exhibits were open that week and which pieces of the usual store offerings were available in which colors varied, I was not usually able to memorize if a particular item had a bar code on it, on the container it was held in, or in the book. All in all, though, the store became my second favorite spot to work, second only to the front desk where I could interact with more people and friendly volunteers.

Outside of these two main tasks, I received training in gallery floating and the museum's innovative *Dimensions in Testimony* section. As a gallery floater, I circulated through the gallery to check on visitors and make sure that basic rules were being followed. The ones most likely to be broken were the restrictions on taking pictures on the first floor and the touching of certain objects, like the 1940s Danish rescue boat in the main Holocaust gallery. I was also responsible for checking all of the spots where visitors are allowed to write their reflections and post them on a board. Occasionally, a kid would write something unrelated, or a visitor would express something that the Museum would not support. I would remove those notes and throw them out. I did not get to spend much time in *Dimensions in Testimony*, but I did learn how it operates. The section features Houston-area William J. "Bill" Morgan, a Holocaust survivor whom visitors can have virtual conversations with. Bill recorded the answers to nearly one thousand questions about his experience before, during, and after the Holocaust, and the technology listens for keywords in a visitor's question to direct Bill Morgan to respond with the correct answer. Students often feel shy when trying to come up with what to ask or being the first to go, so the volunteer or intern working in that room is responsible for showing them how the technology works and providing a list of sample questions to get the ball rolling.

One thing that I opted to do outside of my internship hours was to participate in the museum's gallery host training on three Wednesday evenings in February. As soon as I learned about the opportunity, I knew I had to participate. I wanted an intimate look at how volunteers and tour guides are trained to answer questions and teach about the content in the permanent galleries. Gallery hosts at Holocaust Museum Houston are considered to be one step down from the docents, or tour guides; it is the gallery host's job to walk around and keep an eye on things while also being able to answer more specific questions about a gallery's content for visitors. Each session focused on one of the permanent galleries. The education department provided me and other volunteers with question guides and an overview of the content in each gallery. We were encouraged to choose our favorite items and talk about those with guests as a way to connect with them more personally. I thought the training was a unique experience, and I may consider going through docent training in the future.

Throughout my internship, my supervisor arranged meetings for me with members of the staff in different departments. I tried to request a broad range of people because I had not encountered certain job titles in a museum setting before. I wanted to meet with people who were doing something completely different from what I want to do in the future to see how all the pieces of a museum fit together. First, I met with Colton Larsen, a major gifts officer in the development department. He taught me a lot about how fundraising for a museum works, specifically with donor recruitment. I learned that there is a balance to be struck between cultivating existing relationships and constantly seeking out new ones. Younger donors are particularly important to the Holocaust Museum currently because they are the next generation of people who will be supporting these types of institutions and guiding the next stages of content development. Colton walked me through the cultivation process step by step, from research, through the cold call, and

into the expansion of that relationship. Later, I had the opportunity to meet with the assistant director of the development department, Will Horton, to zoom out and see how fundraising and incoming donations are managed on a broader administrative level. Additionally, I had a chance to tour the Holocaust Museum's library with the librarian, Joel Bangilan. He walked me and another volunteer through their collection, pointing out the museum library's rarest books as well as areas where the collection is lacking. The library offers a wide variety of resources, from books, to DVDs and recordings, and database access centered on the Holocaust and the studies of human rights and genocide. Anyone can come in and conduct research during visiting hours, and members, volunteers, and docents can borrow books from the library. While the collection is small, I find the library's offerings to be substantial.

After the library tour, I stopped by chief curator Carol Manley's office to introduce myself to her. I knew that my supervisor had mentioned to her that I was interested in speaking to her about curation, but I wanted to put a face to a name. I was always taught that the best way to make a first impression is a firm handshake and knowing how to make what she calls "pleasant conversation." My choice to step in paid off because she scheduled a meeting with me only a few weeks later. My internship supervisor, Rennes McCloud, told me that this was the first time in a long time that the curator had taken such an interest in working directly with interns and had the time to do so before the conclusion of a student's internship.

During the meeting in mid-February, Carol and I got to know each other's educational and historical working backgrounds. She told me about her roundabout journey to curation; she never went to school for public history and ended up in the position through an alternative route. Throughout many of my internship experiences, I have found this to be a common theme. Many museum workers seem to arrive at their careers in a circuitous fashion, whether through

education, volunteering in the field, or making the right connections. After introducing ourselves, Carol offered me the opportunity to work in the curatorial department one day a week for four hours on a variety of projects that she had going on at the time. One was to help scan documents from the 20<sup>th</sup> century that had just come in from a major donor whose family members survived and perished in the Holocaust, one was to help catalog the inventory of objects and documents that had recently been brought in from the old storage unit, and the third was to help create a spreadsheet with a full inventory of every artifact, image, and label text in the permanent galleries of the museums. The spreadsheet would then be used to train volunteers and docents how to be gallery hosts and tour guides. I jumped at the chance to contribute and chose to start work on the third project.

Working on the spreadsheet was a fantastic experience. Data entry is a strength of mine; I enjoy the monotony of it, and I can type quickly and see visible progress being made. I learned to take pictures of label texts and artifacts down in the main gallery in batches so that I could then come back upstairs and do a stretch of work on the laptop. I would type up all the labels first before uploading the images of each item and spending more time cropping them to the correct size. As I worked, I found myself learning so much more about the Holocaust than I had during any of my other visits. I am someone who likes to walk around museums and stop at the things that catch my eye. Through this project, I had to read through every label and see every image and item. It completely transformed my historical knowledge of the Holocaust as well as the events leading up to it and the aftermath.

I drew a lot of my experience working with the cataloging experience from my Readings in Public History course during my first semester at UH. In that class, my classmates and I were tasked with coming up with the concept and overall structure of the upcoming “100 Years of



Stories” exhibit opening at the M.D. Anderson Library this fall as well as choosing images and potential objects that would work well with the different themes. One of the lectures in the early part of the semester was a tutorial on cataloging using Excel from one of the librarians from special collections. I learned the importance of metadata and pulling as many details as possible for each item so that one can locate it later and easily pull the information when it is needed.

I completed the entire Holocaust exhibit gallery the week before my last week at the internship and received high praise from Carol. On my final day working with her, she asked me to try something new and conduct an inventory of one of the collection boxes that they needed to know what was inside. I received a quick tutorial on how to use the museum’s inventory form as well as the PastPerfect software that they use, the current leader in museum collection management and a popular choice at most museums. I loved that on my last day, I got to try something completely different. PastPerfect was not a program that I had ever worked with hands-on, and I liked exploring the interface to see how different pieces of the catalog records and overall item descriptions fit together. Additionally, while sorting through the box, I got to pick up different fragile documents and read through them. I have never had such an intimate time with historical items, and I loved it.

I gained a lot of new skills from this internship. I now feel more comfortable speaking to strangers in a customer service setting, and I have learned how to guide people clearly and concisely. I have dramatically improved my knowledge of how a museum is run on the floor day-to-day and how hard the visitor services department must work with a small staff to keep things moving smoothly. I admire them all for how much work they put in on a daily and weekly basis. I made new friends with a couple of the visitor services coordinators, and we were always happy to see each other on Thursdays and Fridays when I was scheduled on the first floor. I feel

that through speaking with staff in various departments, I have a much clearer understanding of the financial inner workings of running a museum. I look forward to improving on that knowledge through my Financial Management for the Arts course next fall. Additionally, I believed that I proved myself to be a hard worker who is highly adaptable to a fast-paced environment with changing circumstances. I believe that I could step into a front-of-house position comfortably after graduate school without feeling like I was completely lost.

I plan on continuing to volunteer with Holocaust Museum Houston a few times a month next year. I was told that they would be very happy to have me back as a regular volunteer whenever I had availability. Additionally, Carol Manley invited me to volunteer upstairs again with the collections department in August. My visitor coordinator friends had never heard of that happening before. I plan on accepting the offer. Carol also wrote me a glowing review on my progress in her portion of my internship and has agreed to be a reference for me for future jobs. I am very proud of that. I look forward to returning to the museum in the fall to further my training in the visitor services and curatorial fields.