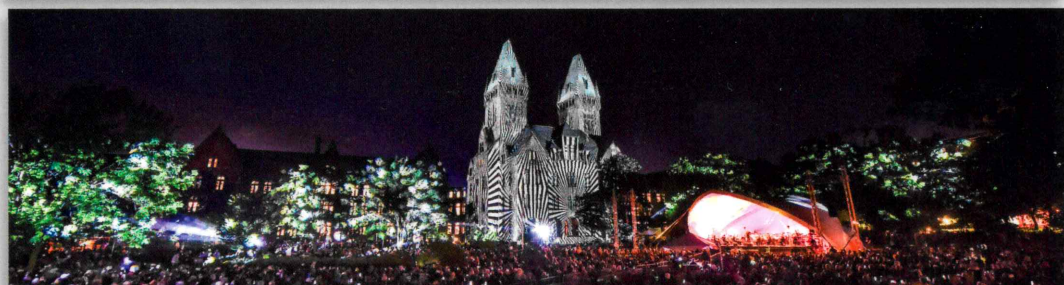


EDITED BY JILL M. GRADWELL
AND KATHRYN H. LEACOCK



Finding History Where You Least Expect It

SITE-BASED STRATEGIES FOR
TEACHING ABOUT THE PAST



Finding History Where You Least Expect It



American
Alliance of
Museums

AMERICAN ALLIANCE OF MUSEUMS

The American Alliance of Museums has been bringing museums together since 1906, helping to develop standards and best practices, gathering and sharing knowledge, and providing advocacy on issues of concern to the entire museum community. Representing more than 35,000 individual museum professionals and volunteers, institutions, and corporate partners serving the museum field, the Alliance stands for the broad scope of the museum community.

The American Alliance of Museums' mission is to champion museums and nurture excellence in partnership with its members and allies.

Books published by AAM further the Alliance's mission to make standards and best practices for the broad museum community widely available.



Finding History Where You Least Expect It

Site-Based Strategies for Teaching about the Past

Edited by Jill M. Gradwell
and Kathryn H. Leacock

Bib. 600005966
Item. 100008211
Barcode. 00001000
Call no. LB 1047
F 56
2020
Date 03 / 11. น. / 2564

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Published by Rowman & Littlefield
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

6 Tinworth Street, London SE11 5AL, United Kingdom

Copyright © 2020 by American Alliance of Museums

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote passages in a review.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020934264
ISBN 978-1-5381-4087-1 (cloth : alk. paper)
ISBN 978-1-5381-4088-8 (pbk. alk. paper)
ISBN 978-1-5381-4089-5 (electronic)

Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Preface | vii |
| Acknowledgments | xi |
| 1 Freedom Conversations: Connecting Past to Present with Facilitated Dialogue <i>Christine Bacon</i> | 1 |
| 2 “The Most Boring Thing in the World”: Scrapbooks and the Archives <i>Daniel DiLandro</i> | 11 |
| 3 enLIGHTening the Past <i>Corey Fabian-Barrett</i> | 21 |
| 4 Art as History: Illustrating Your Community’s Past <i>Michele Graves</i> | 31 |
| 5 Vintage Game Nite @ the TR Site <i>Lenora Henson</i> | 39 |
| 6 Learning History One Family at a Time <i>Suzanne Jacobs</i> | 47 |
| 7 The Extinct Birds Project <i>Jane Johnson, Twan Leenders, and Alberto Rey</i> | 55 |
| 8 History in a Science Museum? <i>Kathryn H. Leacock</i> | 65 |

| | | |
|----|---|-----|
| 9 | “I Cannot Vote, but I Can Be Voted For”: A Girl Scout Badge Program <i>Ann Marie Linnabery</i> | 77 |
| 10 | At Rest in the Weeds: The Restoration of Institutional Cemeteries <i>David Mack-Hardiman</i> | 87 |
| 11 | Windows to History: Frank Lloyd Wright’s Martin House Light Screens <i>Gina Miano</i> | 97 |
| 12 | Cooking Up History: Learning from Gingerbread <i>Jean Neff</i> | 105 |
| 13 | Bound in History: Handcrafting Books on the Roycroft Campus <i>Alan Nowicki and Amizetta Haj</i> | 111 |
| 14 | History Around the Block: Neighborhood Archaeology <i>Elizabeth S. Peña and Kristen Gasser</i> | 119 |
| 15 | A Peek Beyond the Veil: Spiritualist Shorts at Lily Dale <i>Amanda Shepp</i> | 129 |
| 16 | Tracing the Past for the Present and Future: An Artist-in-Residence Program <i>Nancy Spector</i> | 139 |
| 17 | Getting You in the Holiday “Spirit”: It WAS a Wonderful Life! <i>Sandy Starks</i> | 147 |
| 18 | All Are Welcome: The Museum as a Stage for Community Dialogue <i>Tara L. Walker</i> | 155 |
| | Bibliography | 163 |
| | Index | 167 |
| | About the Editors and Contributors | 177 |

Preface

Generally speaking, if you work in a museum, you love museums. Accordingly, to write a book for the museum profession is akin to preaching to the choir. As a profession, we pride ourselves on our resourcefulness, collegiality, and willingness to share what works (and offer guidance on what doesn't). For almost a decade, we were the recipients of several federal grants through the Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities and led numerous professional development workshops for teachers that focused on teaching history using museums and landmarks. While the topics, cohorts, and focus differed slightly, the overarching goal of providing teachers with the necessary tools, comfort level, and awareness of how to use cultural sites in their classroom was pervasive. Consequently, we saw a whole host of museums, cultural organizations, and museum professionals pull together to provide workshops, offer professional development opportunities, and share their respective institution with the various teacher cohorts. Many of these programs were new and innovative, and they provided historical content when the teachers were not expecting it.

At one of our workshops, we could feel the tension and confusion in the room when a group of social studies teachers gathered around a table at a science museum. While they didn't say it aloud, we sensed they were wondering, "Why are we here?" So sparked the idea for this book; how can we share the great projects that were born out of these endeavors (and more) with a wider audience? The edited volume, *Finding History Where You Least Expect It: Site-Based Strategies for Teaching about the Past*, explores creative and engaging museum programs across varied sites. The chapters highlight how museum programming, object-based learning, and site-specific education can impact learning for people of all ages. The goal is to appeal to

museum educators, curriculum developers, university students, and teachers to illustrate the variety of programming you can do in your own backyard.

The following eighteen chapters have been brought together to illustrate how history can be taught (and learned) in the most unlikely places or in the most unlikely ways. Museums and cultural institutions are striving to remain relevant in an ever-changing landscape. This volume looks at organizations that have challenged the traditional offerings expected of their organization and are working to break into new markets and develop new programs for diverse and previously untapped audiences.

Western New York and the City of Buffalo have oftentimes been described as the “City of Good Neighbors.” As a population, we are a close-knit community and inherently proud, even in the unwavering support of our sports teams. The same can be said for many American cities and small towns. We wanted to take this opportunity to share all the great things that are happening at upstate New York’s cultural institutions that can be reproduced elsewhere. While the featured institutions are regionally linked, the ideas in *Finding History Where You Least Expect It* can be replicated in organizations anywhere. While we advocate for site-based programs, the authors also offer suggestions for replicating their ideas in school classrooms or with minimal financial investment. Most programs can be scaled accordingly and are open to further modifications.

A review of the recent publications in the field of museum education and the teaching of history shows a need for a book that looks at learning through the lens of the program itself. While publications exist that explore educational pedagogy and programming according to museum type, this volume explores history through the lens of the specific program. The authors walk the reader through their ideas, development, implementation, and successes, allowing others the ability to learn from their endeavor in order to build a unique program for themselves. The chapters are written by those most closely associated with the program, providing insider guidance through every aspect of its development. Let their drive to try something new be the catalyst for your organization. Use their experience to persuade your board of managers, executive director, or superintendent that there is always something new that can be tried and achieved.

The goal of this book is to further encourage teachers, museum professionals, and emerging museum professionals to think outside the box. Don’t be encumbered by the outdated definition of your historic site or stuck taking your students on the same field trip because that is always where they go in fourth grade. As a field, museum professionals are always looking for new and inventive ways to share their passion, collection, and content. It shouldn’t be confined to a formal field trip.

The Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center had the opportunity to start from the beginning, building their exhibits, interpretation themes, and programs from scratch. Outlined here is the public program *Freedom Conversations*, which builds on the work of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience to deliver a sensitive historical topic to a contemporary audience. The Buffalo Museum of Science built on a collection that had remained underutilized since the turn of the twentieth century, illustrating that material can always be reconfigured, reworked, and reinterpreted to become another program for a new audience. The staff of the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural National Historic Site thought about the activities that the original inhabitants of their historic house would do for entertainment and replicated an evening of gaming for a millennial audience.

Singing in a cemetery? Learning from gingerbread? Board games and beer in a historic house? These are just a few of the questions that are answered in this volume. We love what we do, and we want that passion for learning to be contagious—with the right program, even the most stubborn patron can learn when they are not expecting to. Let this collection of chapters inspire you to create the next big program, a call to action, history where you least expect it!

Acknowledgments

The very nature of this project is collaborative, and we found ourselves overwhelmed with the outpouring of support for the initial idea. We have always been fortunate to work with such an amazing group of museum groupies, and we hope that this volume shows what a close-knit group we are. We are extremely grateful to those who contributed to this volume and to those who granted permission for us to use their ideas and photographs, and offered feedback on the chapters while in progress.

We are also thankful to those organizations that wanted to participate but were already overcommitted and overwhelmed with their current roles and responsibilities that one more thing on their plate would cause it to tip completely. We understand.

We want to acknowledge the support from our own organizations, Marisa Wigglesworth, President and CEO of the Buffalo Museum of Science, who supported this project from the beginning. Also, the State University of New York Buffalo State College for the sabbatical release time and the financial support endowed by the late Edward O. "E. O." Smith Jr., former Chair of the Department of History and Social Studies Education.

Our executive editor, Charles Harmon, whose enthusiastic and timely response to our initial proposal gave us the boost we needed to continue with this work. His unwavering encouragement and lightning-fast email responses were sincerely appreciated. We thank Charles, Erinn Slanina, and the rest of their colleagues at Rowman & Littlefield for their guidance and support in publishing this volume.

We are ever so grateful to our immediate and extended families who supported us along the way. And finally, most of all, we want to thank our children, Camden, Kellen, Declan, Elias, and Evelyn, who help us to continue to view museums and cultural sites with fresh perspectives and find history where even we least expect it.

Chapter One

Freedom Conversations

Connecting Past to Present with Facilitated Dialogue

Christine Bacon

Located on the international border with Canada, the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center is an innovative, experiential history museum. Our mission is “to reveal authentic stories of Underground Railroad freedom seekers and abolitionists in Niagara Falls, that inspire visitors to recognize modern injustices that stem from slavery and take action toward an equitable society.”¹ The heritage center was designed and constructed to align with the principles of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, self-described as “the only global network of historic sites, museums and memory initiatives that connect past struggles to today’s movements for human rights.”² The permanent exhibition, *One More River to Cross*, consists of four galleries that use scenic buildouts, animated original artwork, interactive media, and artifacts to immerse visitors in antebellum Niagara Falls. Here, they explore the crucial role its location, geography, and courageous residents—particularly its African American residents—played in the Underground Railroad. Large wall-mounted quotations throughout the historic galleries and the final fifth gallery, called the Freedom Gallery, encourage visitors to connect this history to their own lives. The exhibit *One More River to Cross* at the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center was selected as a 2019 Award of Excellence winner by the Leadership in History awards committee of the American Association for State and Local History, the nation’s most prestigious competition for recognition of achievement in state and local history.

When it opened in May 2018, the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center was the first new cultural attraction in the City of Niagara Falls, New York, in more than thirty-five years. Much anticipation surrounded the opening, and from the very start, we knew we wanted to exceed expectations and to be at the forefront of Underground Railroad interpretation. To that end,



Figure 1.1. The US Custom House in Niagara Falls was transformed into the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center.

Courtesy of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center.

we designed the permanent exhibit to enhance what we knew would become our signature public program: *Freedom Conversations*. In the year since we opened, our facilitated dialogue program *Freedom Conversations* has indeed hit the mark. Not only is this sixty-minute guided tour program run daily for walk-in guests, but organizations also collaborate with us to use the program in innovative ways. The *Freedom Conversations* program has become of, by, and for our community in ways that exceed even our own expectations.

While guided tours are the signature staple of history museums, traditional lecture-style tours have minimal impact because learning is passive, and, therefore, content retention is minimal. We asked how this new heritage center could do more than merely provide historical content to visitors. Building on the canon of traditional historical interpretation, *Freedom Conversations* focuses on facilitated dialogue. Because the content of each tour depends on the involvement of the visitors, no two tours are ever the same. When visitors are actively engaged in creating meaning from the historical content, the result is a powerful, impactful learning experience.

Freedom Conversations is the means by which the heritage center makes the history of the Underground Railroad relevant for visitors today. The program helps us achieve our mission. We admittedly have a social justice goal. Our vision is to encourage visitors to take action for civil and human rights and to create global change that begins in the Niagara Falls community.

Niagara Falls played a unique role in the Underground Railroad. Because it sits on an international border, freedom seekers arriving here were mere

steps away from liberty, after having endured perilous travel for hundreds of miles. Recognizing this, interpretation at the heritage center focuses on the strength and agency of the individuals who used the Underground Railroad network to claim their own freedom. Freedom seekers themselves are at the heart of our stories. The heritage center's approach to Underground Railroad interpretation is not to ask how communities of African descent *survived*, but rather to demonstrate how these communities *thrived*. In alignment with this philosophical approach, in our narratives freedom seekers are not beleaguered victims of an oppressive system; they are triumphant heroes of subterfuge and resistance. The *Freedom Conversations* interpretive approach is to communicate stories demonstrating that on the shores of the Niagara River, freedom seekers stood as powerful masters of their own destiny, just as many people today take great risks to control their own fate.

While the Underground Railroad must be set within the broader context of the institutionalized system of chattel slavery that once existed in the United States, slavery, per se, is not one of the heritage center's primary interpretive themes. Rather, we focus on the inspirational network of people of African descent who lived in, worked in, or passed through Niagara Falls in pursuit of freedom. Moreover, the *Freedom Conversations* program connects their stories to the continued struggle for all people to live free from oppression. The primary interpretive themes for the program are as follows: (1) the Underground Railroad in Niagara Falls: in Niagara Falls, the Underground Railroad operated as an overt resistance to slavery, led by people of African descent, and the dramatic landscape of Niagara Falls drew tourists from the southern United States, which, when coupled with its geographic location on the shore of the Niagara River—a narrow crossing point along the lengthy Great Lakes water border between the United States and Canada—made Niagara Falls one of the most significant crossing points for freedom seekers on the Underground Railroad; (2) freedom: the right to live freely is a universal human desire to which all visitors can relate; and (3) social justice: historical stories of resistance to oppression provide insight into current struggles for freedom and can motivate individuals to work toward a just and equitable society.

Freedom Conversations at the heritage center has several overarching goals: provide documented, historically accurate information about the people and events that define the unique role Niagara Falls played in the Underground Railroad as a border crossing between the United States and Canada; promote active narratives that give agency to the authentic, yet little-known individuals of African descent who lived in, worked in, or passed through Niagara Falls in search of liberty; help visitors recognize that some modern injustices have direct roots in slavery, while other contemporary struggles parallel those of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century freedom seekers; and motivate visitors to work toward a more just and equitable society.

Due to the heritage center's location in the urban core of an international tourist destination, the audience for *Freedom Conversations* is diverse. Our target audience is the local community within the City of Niagara Falls, with a special focus on residents of African descent. The City of Niagara Falls has suffered both a population and an economic decline over the past half-decade. The population has dropped from more than 100,000 residents in the 1950s to less than 50,000 as of 2018. Although 87.7 percent of the population has at least a high school diploma, only 17 percent have earned a bachelor's degree or higher. A significant portion of residents live below the poverty level, with rates as high as 64.8 percent in the most economically disadvantaged census tract, which is located near the heritage center.³ Reminding residents of their city's inspiring history provides a sense of pride to a community that has not felt it had much to celebrate in recent decades.

Our secondary audience consists of the wider western New York community. Outside the urban cores of Niagara Falls and Buffalo, the population is ethnically homogenous, with most residents being of European descent. Economic indicators are higher in several suburbs, but in small towns and rural areas, economic hardships prevail, as the entire area (including the City of Niagara Falls) was impacted by the withdrawal of automotive, steel, and other manufacturing industries in the last decades of the twentieth century.

A third audience consists of out-of-town tourists who visit Niagara Falls each year. Estimates as to the size of this audience vary, but generally number in the millions annually. This audience is widely diverse and cannot easily be categorized into any particular homogenous group. Drawn to Niagara Falls to witness the natural wonder of the falls themselves, visitors hail from across the world with vastly different socioeconomic, educational, and linguistic backgrounds.

Recognizing this diversity, the team at the heritage center nevertheless determined to find common ground. We settled upon the notion of "freedom." The quest for liberty, or self-determination, is one to which all visitors can relate in ways that are uniquely personal to the individual. All of us have felt bound or constrained in one way or another, whether by authority figures, by lack of economic resources, or by other limiting factors. Likewise, we have all sought to free ourselves from the limitations that hold us back, whether in our personal or professional lives. This desire to control one's own life is a universal theme, and the *Freedom Conversations* program is designed to meet visitors wherever they are on their personal journey to freedom.

To do this, *Freedom Conversations* relies heavily on the facilitated dialogue historical interpretation technique.⁴ Facilitated dialogue tours use a strategically designed set of questions—an arc of dialogue—to guide participants into a structured, meaningful conversation about a challenging

or controversial topic. Through constructive sharing and listening, facilitated dialogue provides a venue in which proactive citizenship skills can be modeled, learned, and practiced. Specifically, the *Freedom Conversations* program at the heritage center aligns with the facilitated dialogue techniques taught by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, whose mission is to connect the past to modern social justice issues—“to turn memory to action.”⁵⁵ *Freedom Conversations* takes place at the heritage center daily for walk-in visitors and is offered to groups upon request. The program takes approximately sixty minutes and encompasses the entire museum.

Tours begin just outside the heritage center in a public atrium where one wall provides a visual general overview of the Underground Railroad. Here, facilitators begin a conversation with visitors, getting everyone to say something (anything), setting ground rules that include listening to one another with mutual respect, and soliciting an affirmative agreement from every participant that they will honor the process, the history, and one another. These initial steps are crucial to the success of the program. If visitors actively voice an answer to even one introductory question such as, “Where are you from?” they will be more likely to speak a second time in response to a more challenging question. Likewise, if everyone has affirmatively acknowledged an agreement to speak and listen with respect, the discussion is more likely to remain civil.

Once inside the heritage center, facilitators weave hyper-local historical content with questions for the tour participants to answer. Nearly all of the



Figure 1.2. Visitors engaged in *Freedom Conversations* in the center’s exhibition space.

Courtesy of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center.

history presented inside the museum focuses exclusively on people and events in Niagara Falls. Questions are of four types and follow an “arc of dialogue.” Facilitators begin with phase one questions, which are designed to build community, are non-threatening, and are relatively easy to answer. Phase two questions invite visitors to think about and share their own experiences. Phase three questions challenge visitors to “dig deeper into their assumptions and to probe underlying social conditions that inform our diversity of perspectives.”⁶ Finally, phase four questions provide closure to the experience by reinforcing a sense of community. Visitors may be asked to reflect on what they heard or what they want to know more about. Not all tours will flow through the entire narrative arc from phase one to phase four. Some tours will cycle through this arc several times on multiple different topics. It all depends on the visitors.

The program’s success is not due solely to the adoption of one interpretive technique. Before we launched the first *Freedom Conversations*, there were many months of preparation involving a conscious shift in the traditional systemic structures that typify many museum interpretive programs. Ultimately, our approach is to model the change in perspective in the very infrastructure of our organization—both in terms of human capital and built resources. The *Freedom Conversations* program is more than a one-off program for us; it is the outward manifestation of an internal commitment to take action for civil and human rights and create global change that begins in the Niagara Falls community. Facilitated dialogue is our primary tool in realizing this vision, both internally with our own staff and externally with our visitors.

With a brand-new museum to create from the ground up, we had a unique opportunity to build facilitated dialogue directly into the permanent exhibits, which would then be used to enhance our *Freedom Conversations*. This commitment to facilitated dialogue programming was first memorialized in the request for proposals (RFP) seeking a design firm to create the permanent exhibition at the heritage center. Specifically, in the “Design and Goals” section of the RFP, the expectation was for the design to align with the worldwide movement of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. Their mission states, “We are sites, individuals, and initiatives activating the power of places of memory to engage the public in connecting past and present in order to envision and shape a more just and humane future.”⁷

The contracted design firm built on the work of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience to design the permanent galleries. Although the *Freedom Conversations* program makes use of the entire exhibit, it relies heavily on the “Freedom Gallery” and its “Freedom Videos,” both of which incorporated the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience into the design process, with the Coalition’s Braden Paynter participating as a consultant. When it came time to train our historical interpreters for the *Freedom Conversations*

program, we again brought in Paynter to lead the facilitated dialogue portion of the training.

Before we could train the staff, we had to hire them. Here, too, we tried hard to “walk the walk” rather than simply “talk the talk.” For far too long, the narrative of the Underground Railroad has been told from the perspective of the white abolitionist, aside from Harriet Tubman. The predominant narrative generally ignores the brave black men, women, and children who operated the network of people and places by which enslaved individuals *freed themselves*. Although white abolitionists helped, the Underground Railroad was primarily driven by people who were held in bondage against their will. As such, who should rightly control the historical narrative of the Underground Railroad? From whose perspective should the story be told? Whose voice should guide the conversation about chattel slavery’s impact on twenty-first-century society?

Here it is necessary to confront a disappointing reality in the museum profession: its profound lack of diversity. A 2015 study by the Mellon Foundation documented that 84 percent of curators, conservators, educators, and leadership in art museums are white non-Hispanic.⁸ Those of us on the ground in history museums know our statistics are similar. In 1992, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) published *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*.⁹ In it, AAM’s task force advised that to stay relevant and to carry out an educational mission, museums must reflect the diversity of our society “in all activities and at all levels.”¹⁰ The task force recommended widening the arena for recruitment of professional staff members. This is further supported by the new AAM 2019 publication *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums*.¹¹

The heritage center does this in several ways. One method has been to actively recruit historical interpreters for *Freedom Conversations* at a grassroots level in communities of color. A second method has been to value an applicant’s passion for the work and our mission at least as highly as we value a background in museum studies or public history. A third method is that we have eschewed the long-standing reliance on volunteer docents in favor of a fully paid interpretive staff. Reliance upon the people who can afford to forgo income by volunteering can lead to a homogenous frontline staff in terms of both ethnic background and age. Making the financial commitment to find, train, and pay a museum staff drawn from a nontraditional museum applicant pool has presented challenges, but the rewards are far greater.

The feedback from visitors to our interpretive approach has been overwhelmingly positive. Visitors have described the experience as “profoundly moving” and as having “brought [them] to tears more than once.” Community stakeholders have sought out the *Freedom Conversations* program to



Figure 1.3. Learning the stories of others is a key component to *Freedom Conversations*.

Courtesy of the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center.

help spark dialogue between groups that do not always see eye to eye. For example, *Freedom Conversations* helped members of a predominately black church in Niagara Falls find common ground with leaders from a Jewish organization in Buffalo. Similarly, we were approached by regional management of a national retailer to provide a *Freedom Conversations* program for the company's mostly white managers, with the goal of helping them to better understand the perspectives of their frontline staff, most of whom are people of color.

When done well, *Freedom Conversations* is applied history at its finest. Grounded in academic research conducted by Judith Wellman, PhD, the program connects historical people and events with present-day issues that impact the lives of participants on the tour. For example, conversations about abolitionists who defied the Fugitive Slave Act blend with questions about whether and under what circumstances breaking the law is justified today. The conversation might lead to a discussion about how laws are created in the