

The African American Museum in Philadelphia: Performance-based Programming and Innovative Approaches in Reaching New Audiences

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Thirty-five years ago, at the intersection of 7th and Arch Streets in downtown Philadelphia, an institution was born. As the first institution funded by a municipality to celebrate African American heritage, the new museum sought to tell the stories of a community and a people who had shaped a nation and the world. Originally called the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum, the museum was established with a ground-breaking mission—to be a resource to the peoples of the African Diaspora, to collect and preserve the evidence of our varied lives and contributions, and, through exhibitions and programs, to interpret and teach lessons of our history and culture. Though our name has changed to the African American Museum in Philadelphia (AAMP), what has not changed is our commitment to that mission. Likewise, from our inception through to today, innovation has been integral to

our mission, a core value expressed through our vision statement and realized in our programs.

In our first 10 years, it became clear that the museum was a trendsetter and a leader in programming. In 1982 the museum forged a new path in performance-based programming, introducing the "Jazz Live Series" that eventually created "Jazz 'till Sunrise." Innovative in its time, this new programming venture featured jazz giants such as Betty Carter, Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln, and helped establish AAMP as the cultural destination for culturally aware African Americans. We furthered our commitment to presenting performance-based programming in 1985 when the museum instituted the "Larry Neal Cultural Series" to showcase the contributions of African Americans in the field of literature. The "Major Writers in Performance" series brought outstanding authors including Maya Angelou, Tone Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Gwendolyn Brooks and Sonia Sanchez to the museum. Together, these programs deepened AAMP's relationship with our core audience and solidified our membership base.

Taking a critical look at the challenges posed by the pending new millennium, the leadership of the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum embarked upon an ambitious and wide-ranging assessment of the museum, its mission and core values, and its goals for the future. The result was the Renaissance Campaign, a far-

reaching new approach that sought to ensure the museum's prominence going into the 21st century. While innovation continued to be articulated as a core value, relevance also became a watchword. AAMP became keenly aware that making meaningful connections with new and diverse audiences would be crucial to the museum's long-term sustainability.

In late 2010, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation challenged the Philadelphia cultural community to come up with innovative ways of presenting art and culture, to step out of our comfort zones and develop "Big Ideas" in how our sector considered engaging audiences. In response, AAMP developed a concept that would meet two key objectives of our 35th anniversary celebration in 2011: to create more public access, and increase our audience of younger adults and more diverse visitors. Building upon the well-established success of our performance-based programming, AAMP proposed *RAAMP It Up Wednesdays* as our foray into public outdoor presentations and free evening admission. *RAAMP It Up Wednesdays* was successfully selected by the Knight Foundation as one of the city's "Big Ideas," and allowed AAMP to create an ambitious 20-week public event schedule. Knight funds were matched with support from PECO and the Exelon Foundation.

RAAMP It Up Wednesdays stretched AAMP's performance-based programming into a new frontier. The rich offerings of black music provided an opportunity to

showcase some known and lesser known talent coming out of Philadelphia's creative community, along with several nationally recognized performers from rhythm and blues, gospel and hip-hop. The genres provided the broad stroke we sought, everything from blues, contemporary jazz and gospel, to spoken work, tap dance, rap, Latin fusion and neo soul. AAMP customized its *RAAMP It Up* marketing to reach the targeted audience of young, culturally aware African American adults, placing special emphasis on social media and guerilla marketing. AAMP's Education, Visitor Services, and Maintenance and Security staffs necessarily developed new operation strategies to maintain the museum's standards during the outdoor programs.

From May through September 2011, AAMP's plaza came alive with a series of *RAAMP It Up* concerts that drew over 7,000 visitors to the museum. The concerts successfully attracted our target market of younger African American adults, as well as a broad representation of other ethnicities. While some of the audience emanated from promotion and marketing efforts—both traditional (radio and newspaper advertising) and the non-traditional (social media and email blasts)—the very nature of outdoor performance helped attract the curious, as well as the dedicated. Visitors stopped for moments or hours coming from work, passing by and becoming attracted to the sounds—the music that was in the air! Our added bonus was welcoming attendees from outdoors into the

museum to experience its core exhibit, *Audacious Freedom*, and temporary exhibit, *Free to Be*.

From its groundbreaking "Jazz Live Series" to the more recent success of *RAAMP It Up Wednesdays*, AAMP's innovative performance-based programming confirms several key lessons:

- Successful program innovation cannot be generated in an organizational vacuum. From its founding through to our 35th anniversary celebration, AAMP has always valued innovation. Innovation has been integral to the organization, from its mission and vision statements through to its programs.
- Innovation must be understood as a process that begins by defining success and includes evaluation and refinement. Although AAMP's first ventures into performance-based programming were successful, AAMP made a strategic decision to develop a different focus and marketing approach for *RAAMP It Up Wednesdays* in order realize its new goals.
- Innovation that is not informed by the realities of day-to-day operations is often short-lived. Staff input and involvement are key to this process. No matter how wonderful the *RAAMP It Up* concerts may have been, the value of the program may have been lost if it was not delivered well in a visitor-ready, welcoming environment. The program's innovations would not have been successful without the input and the on-the-ground execution of the AAMP front-line staff.

- Marketing must be a priority. It allows the institution to attract the audience for the new program by introducing or re-introducing itself, and engaging or re-engaging new or different target markets.
- Relevance is the watch word; patrons have to “get it.” The experience must be meaningful and memorable. AAMP has always used its innovative programming to “connect” with its audience.
- AAMP’s performance-based programming provides the opportunity to entertain as well as educate its audiences. In many instances we must remember that our quest for innovation tied to artistic performances cannot be forged without providing context; the museum’s offerings of history provides this context.

AAMP's 35th anniversary theme, *Celebrating Our Legacy, Embracing our Promise*, was established as a way of recognizing the institution's past accomplishments, while acknowledging and accepting the opportunities ahead. As one *RAAMP It Up* visitor noted in an exit survey, "I've always thought of this museum as reaching greater creative heights." AAMP will continue to strive for relevance, creating innovative programming that tells the stories of a community and a people who had shaped a nation and the world.

Romona Riscoe Benson is President and CEO of the African American Museum in Philadelphia, since 2005. Initially, she served as a management

consultant and developed a plan that provided a roadmap to the Museum's financial and public image recovery. Her accomplishments include completing a \$4.5 million renovation project that included installation of the highly acclaimed core exhibition: Audacious Freedom, which tells the story of African Americans living in Philadelphia from 1776-1876. Her fundraising leadership allowed the museum to see a \$500,000 surplus in support for the Standing on the Shoulders Campaign. Benson has over 25 years experience in nonprofit, arts management and public sector work. She also serves as president of her own consulting firm, Riscoe and Associates, Inc., started in 1997.

Patricia Wilson Aden came to AAMP with a strong background in cultural resource management, organizational development, strategic planning and heritage tourism. She was formerly Executive Director of the Rhythm & Blues Foundation. Her experience included serving as VP for Arts, Culture and Entertainment of Universal Companies, a nonprofit community-based organization, and work as a private consultant specializing in the development of heritage tourism programs, supporting the revitalization of historic neighborhoods, and strategic planning for cultural organizations. As Director of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Office of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, she gained national experience in

historic preservation and the mobilization of grassroots organizations. She also specialized in the revitalization of traditional urban commercial corridors in cities such as Boston, Atlanta, Detroit and Honolulu while working for the National Main Street Center.