

R.I.'s Museum of Work and Culture strives to include visitors of all abilities



WOONSOCKET, R.I. — Making the Museum of Work and Culture accessible for all is a cause that is close to director Anne Conway’s heart.

With Made to Order Mondays, the museum has modified its exhibits specifically for visitors with physical or other disabilities, providing “a welcoming, safe and judgment-free environment,” Conway said.

“We decided to develop educational tools to create a more dynamic and immersive experience for visitors of all abilities,” said Conway, the driving force behind the new program.

For her, the initiative has been personal, as well as professional. Her brother, now 47, is autistic. The family dealt with society’s lack of understanding of his condition as he grew up. “Thirty years ago, people didn’t know what autism meant,” she said.

There were few options back then of places and programs where “people would understand and not judge,” she said.

Driven by her own experiences, and inspired by the programming at places including Vermont’s Shelburne Museum and the Providence Children’s Museum, her staff began working with Meeting Street School about 18 months ago.

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Faculty from Meeting Street's Grace School toured the museum. "The teachers were able to view the exhibits through the eyes of experienced educators" of students with special needs, said curriculum coordinator Susan Vander Does.

Their feedback provided a starting point to make changes.

The goal, said C. Morgan Grefe, executive director of the Rhode Island Historical Society, which oversees the museum, is that "anyone can walk in on any given day and know this is a place for them."



On Made to Order Mondays — the first Monday of each month — the museum is open specifically for those with special needs, providing the opportunity to visit in a less crowded setting.

"You would want to give them more attention, time to tour the museum at their own pace," Conway said.

"The children's museum in Providence does a wonderful job — it has tools for children of all abilities — but those

children grow up," Conway said. "It's important for them to have experiences outside the classroom."

The Autism Project also played a role, holding an information session for staff and volunteers at the museum, which tells the story of the Industrial Revolution, and of French-Canadian immigrants who sought work in northern Rhode Island mills.

"We made some changes, sometimes simple, like turning down the sounds" in some areas, and removing some of the seats in the classroom exhibit, to accommodate guests in wheelchairs, Conway said.

Storybook guides, detailing "what you can touch, what you can smell, what you can see," were created, to help teachers prepare students ahead of the visit. Laminated checklists and dry-erase markers are made available, so young visitors can gauge just how long the tour will last, and extra volunteers are on hand to help.

The modifications address concerns of people of all ages and abilities, not just students. For example, pictures, some of which might hang too high on the walls for those in wheelchairs to see, were reproduced on posters that can be passed around.

Scent stations — open the small box in the farmhouse and smell freshly baked bread, while one in the mill area smells like oil — were carefully placed throughout the museum, providing "a sensory aspect for a student that might need a little extra."

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“For a child that is blind, these are the type of tools that make experiencing the museum tour so much more meaningful,” Conway said.

All of this makes a visit “a lot more relevant and not so overwhelming.”

The museum launched the program in October, and it drew a handful of visitors in each of the first two months. “We are hoping that people really take advantage of it,” Conway said. “We are really working on getting the word out.”

“The goal is not to have the museum full; the goal is to keep the place quiet and welcoming but not overwhelming,” she said.



On Dec. 1, Kristen Skwirz brought five students from her life skills class at the Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School of Coventry.

“The kids really enjoyed it,” Skwirz said, citing the auditory and sensory components. “They were able to feel wool in a farmhouse, and smell oil where they would work in factories.”

The class of 12- and 13-year-olds was able to participate in all parts of the tour, she said, even playing the piano in the turn-of-the-century living room and sitting at the old-

fashioned desks in the classroom.

“They definitely got something out of it because they were talking about it the next day,” she said, adding that the students sent thank you notes to the museum.

With the program up and running, the next part is hearing from the community about what works and what challenges still exist, Grefe said. “It’s not the kind of work where we can sit in our offices and see what happens.” The issue of access for all visitors is “too important, it matters too much,” she said.

Next, the Museum of Work and Culture plans to do some fine-tuning, such as adding closed-captioning to its films, Conway said. And, the staff hopes to continue developing programs and to train more guides.

“There’s still some work to be done but we feel really confident that we can offer a meaningful and really interesting tour,” said Conway.

The Museum of Work and Culture is at 42 South Main St., Woonsocket. Made to Order Mondays are held the first Monday of each month; the next is Jan. 5. Both reservations and walk-ins are accepted; a guide is available for groups of 10 or more. For more information, including admission prices, call (401) 769-9675 or visit rihs.org.

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