

## **BURSARY WINNERS' REPORTS I**

### **Why apply for a GEM Conference bursary?**

**Alexandra Gordon Jones**, *Part-time curator and volunteer manager, Alderney Museum*

This was the first time I had attended a GEM conference, or indeed any museum conference. I finished my Masters a year ago and have been working for the last 6 months as curator for a small museum (with no dedicated learning position) in the Channel Islands. Whilst I have a general interest in learning in museums, until now I have been concentrating my efforts on improving my documentation and display skills. Spending three days at the conference has provided me with the confidence to know that I would like, and indeed can, focus more on the learning aspects of museum work. The vast range of learning programmes in action at present were demonstrated at the breakout sessions and museum visits. I left the conference with some idea of how I can apply these programmes to my current museum over the coming winter, albeit on somewhat of a smaller scale.

However, probably of most use to me at this moment in my career was the opportunity given to me to meet, talk, and make contacts with other people working in museums. It was immensely valuable to be able to discuss ideas and programmes with the other delegates, during the day programmes as well as into the evenings. I look forward to meeting up with these GEM members once again at future training days and conferences.

**Sarah Hamilton**, *Education coordinator, Bell Homestead National Historic Site*

I was fortunate to receive a bursary to attend this year's GEM Conference. I'm a new member of GEM; I'm also an overseas member, from Canada. Without the bursary, I never would have been able to attend this year's conference about heritage and social change. I'm glad I did. I returned with a notebook full of new ideas that I will put into use at home. Also, I really felt connected to the broader museum educator community.

I do belong to a local museum educators' organization in Ontario, but it's good to go to a different place and find out what people are doing there. Museums in the UK are doing some very interesting and innovative things with education. I especially enjoyed learning about successful community-based partnerships in all kinds of museums. We are really struggling with engagement in my local community, and now I have some strategies to bring to the table from this conference.

So, why apply for a bursary? If you are awarded one, you get to meet a dedicated group of educators, in all stages of career development. You also get some great ideas to take back home. You will exchange ideas not only in the workshops and sessions, but over meals and in the evenings. And you will have a great time!

**Jo Rooks**, *Sustainable Learning Officer, Museum of East Anglian Life*

Without the bursary from Geoffrey Bond I would not have been able to attend the conference as the museum I work for has limited funds for CPD and training.

The conference offers an amazing opportunity to meet with other people involved in education in museums and to find out what everyone else is doing! I have come away from Kent with many ideas and a new enthusiasm for what we can achieve at the Museum of East Anglian Life. The breakout sessions were particularly good this year and the afternoon visits to heritage sites in Kent allowed us to have a good hands-on look at what they offer and how it is presented.

Basically it is a chance to take a step back from what you do day to day and to realise that what we are all doing in museum education really makes a difference, and there are also lots of very good ideas to borrow and develop.

**Mike Lefroy**, *Freelance Museum Consultant, Freemantle, Western Australia*

For a first timer to a GEM Conference I found the experience very worthwhile both through the formal Keynote and Breakout sessions and the more informal opportunities to mix with like-minded people during conference breaks and social gatherings.

Of particular interest to me was learning about practical experiences with cutting edge delivery and interpretation programs. There is no doubt the growing public acceptance of sophisticated communication devices such as Bluetooth and MP3 technology provides a great opportunity to engage our visitors in cost effective and innovative ways. But I sensed a strong note of caution about the importance of making sure the ongoing maintenance and upgrading of systems can be effectively funded so the 'Out of Order' sign does not become a permanent feature of the displays.

Another valuable point was the reinforcement of the importance of volunteers in providing a cost effective 'human face' to a museum or historic place and their role as a key story telling link between the visitor and the collection. I was also reminded of the importance of understanding why volunteers are attracted to organizations, not just considering what you want them to do for you. It was interesting to hear about innovative ways the funding of recruitment and training of volunteers is currently being addressed in the UK.

The keynote addresses were all particularly stimulating. I was especially interested in the address by John Holden and the gap he identified between the high general interest level in cultural events and the low attendance at museums. The observation he made that many people rarely attend museums because they feel it's "not for people like them" highlighted the importance of taking museum stories out into the streets and maintaining a multitude of places and levels of learning.

**Izzy Mohammed**, *Community Access Officer, Birmingham City Archives*

I've always had aspirations to attend the GEM conference for some time. Unfortunately, circumstances had previously prevented me from being able to do so. However, this year the GEM Bursary offered enabled me to attend and to benefit from the wider range activities that had been assembled for the purposes of the three day conference.

Looking back I can clearly see how attending the conference has been beneficial in terms of my own professional development. The many different strands to the conference enabled a quite holistic engagement of issues relating to the themes heritage learning and inclusion.

I found the key note speakers valuable in terms of the issues they raised, particularly since they touched on issues that matter a great deal to me too. I found the breakout sessions an effective way of taking the bigger ideas forward and looking into the practical ways in which they relate to us and our work. I found the visits both a relevant continuation of what the conference was seeking to do and also valuable distraction. And beside all that, I met some quite inspiring people; it was an opportunity to acknowledge our own worth and value and to show the way a little for the future.

The GEM conference helped me think about my own work and what needed to be done in the future. It provided a way of envisaging how our work was relevant to the world and how we might go about it. It certainly helped me to focus my own thinking and to serve to ensure that I would remain tuned into the world around me. But crucially, GEM must continue to take the lead and to tackle the critical issues of the day; this is vital for the sector, for society and for GEM itself.