

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Tammie Kahn
The Children's Museum of Houston

Interviewed by: Anna Burke
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Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
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AB: Hello this is Anna Burke and I am sitting here with Tammie Kahn.

TK: Correct.

AB: Executive Director of the Children's Museum of Houston, Texas. I would like to thank you for taking the time to sit with me today. I would like to begin with your early interest in museum fields. Can you tell us something about your personal background and what first sparked your interest?

TK: Yeah it is interesting because I grew up in a small town outside of Fort Worth, Texas, Wichita Falls, Texas. My mom was divorced. This was back in the '50's and the early '60's so I kind of raised myself on a farm that my grandparents owned. That was before we had to worry about latch key kids getting into trouble. It was basically just 50 acres that I could explore by myself and that kind of learning and the opportunity to have informal learning experiences that occurred throughout the day has always been something that I have relished and you know probably started in early childhood. So my mom was a teacher. I have always enjoyed learning and teaching and I think that museums, particularly for people that have grown up where they have been able to make free choice and learning decisions for themselves, museums become the natural extension of that kind of learning behavior. Again, since I am now old, a lot of this behavior was farmed before personal computers and the kind of information that we have now is aided

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie**Interview Date: July 2, 2008**

by technology was possible but it is rewarding that at least in The Children's Museum field we continue to see our audience grow because even with technology and virtual experiences, nothing can replace people to people learning that occurs in these kinds of museums.

KH: Can you tell me something about your museum training such as what was offered at school and the experience that you sought out yourself?

TK: Yeah. It is interesting I went to the University of Texas in Austin and I was really just interested in making a living. I didn't even think about museums as a field and it wasn't until I had gone through a marketing background and advertising and worked for years in marketing that I realized that museums were a great place to reward a business background but also a passion for improving the community. Having grown up in a small town I have always had a sense of community that I couldn't avoid. So I hate to say I'm probably one of the least qualified people in terms of my educational background, as far as working here at The Children's Museum goes, but by the early 1980's I was lucky enough to go to work at The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and started working with people that did have formal museum training, museum administration training and some of that rubbed off by osmosis. Most of it though I think has to do with just being able to run a small business and being able to read what your community needs so that you are successfully attracting and managing the resources necessary to build programs and activities and exhibits that would satisfy the needs of a community. That's what I have been able to do here to the best of my ability, somebody else could do it a lot better probably but that's what I try to do and I think for that it was really more having the business background and whatever else fuels the passion for wanting to serve people.

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie**Interview Date: July 2, 2008**

AB: At the Museum of Fine Arts what responsibilities did you take on?

TK: I started off first as the membership and grants writer in the development department which again, is that department that brings in resources and I eventually became the... I think the associate director of marketing. So it was audience development. In that role back in the '80's and '90's, you know, Houston's always been such a growing, exciting city that it was so thrilling to see Houston during those days when it was transforming itself into a major international city and the population was rapidly changing and of course in my job which was over the course of about a ten year period, was to ensure that the museum understood its audience and was tracking it's programming so that it was relevant to the community.

AB: How did you deal with situations in which you felt like you had little experience when you first started out?

TK: Well this is going to be hard to believe but we didn't have the internet. We had to call people on the phone or you know make appointments to see people if they were close enough that you could get to them and just, you know, look for not necessarily a true mentor that would take me on or us on that would give advise. I think in those days probably the old fashion industry publications, professional journals, white papers, newspapers, you name it, all that information was the life link and of course the same kind of information is available now but it's just a click away.

AB: When did you first start to work for The Children's Museum?

TK: I started in July of '95. I was the second full time director. The museum had been founded in the early '80's by a wonderful woman who had chosen to leave and I was recruited at that time.

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie**Interview Date: July 2, 2008**

AB: How do you compare the operation and attendance of The Houston Children's Museum with your former jobs?

TK: It's again the business background that I think helps me bring value to this organization. So in terms of other jobs, I took all of the understanding, you know, the wins and the losses and tried to blend them into the museum. We have always been a hit. Fortunately we are in one of the best markets for a children's museum. The population here is growing at about ten percent per year. Right now the 5.8 million community, about 1.1 of the 5.8 are children 12 and younger which is the market we serve. So in terms of former jobs when I got here I just wanted to absorb as much information as I could about the market, who was what, what ages, what is their socioeconomic standing? What motivated their parents to come to Houston? For instance, 60% of the adult Hispanic males in Houston were born outside the U.S. borders. Some of them have brought great resources with them, a lot of money, they have educational background but the majority of the folks that have relocated here, at least during the 13, 14 years that I have been at The Children's Museum, have come have economic refugees and so, you know, my background is to understand the metrics of the market but also to understand the motivation and how to sell a product or service and that's what we are trying to do at The Children's Museum. Did that answer your question?

AB: Yeah.

TK: Okay good.

AB: When I usually think of a museum it's a "look but don't touch" mentality. Do you find it difficult transferring a "look and please touch" mentality over to this museum?

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

TK: Yeah it's interesting because for the last I'd say 25 years, the category of museums in the United States that has really taken off are children's museums. They look easy to start. They are not very expensive probably to start. There's not a lot of barriers to entry deal, we use that old marketing term. So all museums whether they are art museums or science museums or even zoos or aquariums, all of which are considered museums, they were all looking to children's museums to look for best practices. So in an art museum even over the last 25 years, almost 30 years that I have been involved in museums, what was traditionally a "hang the art on the wall" or "don't touch the sculpture" kind of mentality was already beginning to change. Now nobody would let you walk to the Museum of Fine Arts Houston and touch the Rembrandt but they would have something there for adults and especially for children, to perhaps paint their own picture, to experiment with paints on paper or to perhaps be able to touch certain kinds of sculptures, not perhaps in the permanent collection but in a teaching collection. So it is interesting that children's museums and in particular The Children's Museum of Houston has been seen as an innovator in understanding how people learn in informal learning environments, i.e. children's museums. The programming that we have done here has been emulated by numerous museums around the country, in fact, around the world because it really does improve children's ability to learn their self esteem and most importantly their parent's recognition that they are learners. It is very gratifying to see all museums, no matter what their disciplines are begin to embrace these practices.

AB: What were some of the first problems you ever saw?

TK: At The Children's Museum of Houston it was first a business equation. We were in a negative business spiral. I had gotten here about two and a half years after they had

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie**Interview Date: July 2, 2008**

opened the new building which unfortunately was opened with a debt an operating shortfall because of the staff's inability to keep good accounting records. There weren't enough people on staff to get the much larger museum opened back in '92. So as a result of the operating surplus the decision makers at the museum decided to increase the admission fee and reduce services and cut back on hours and that kind of classic situation. Fortunately the board had already stepped in and had started to make really needed improvements in programming. So when I first got here it was a matter of implementing the board's vision that the museum would be much more interactive and engaging and honestly we used the term "fun" a lot. We didn't think it was "fun" enough, even though we were a children's museum. The first project once we got the budget stabilized was to expand what we call the "How Does it Work?" gallery. Each one of these galleries that are long term installations at the museum are organization around the quintessential childhood question, "How does it work?" "Where does it come from?" "Can I do that?" and so forth. So really leading the board through strategic planning along with key staffers to decide if we wanted to adhere to those principals became critical. Because we were in an economic downturn both as an institution and the economy back at that time in Houston was still coming out of the extraordinary slump that we had been in the late '80's and early '90's, there were some board members that were really questioning the role of The Children's Museum. You know if the science center is down the street, the Houston Museum of Natural Science museum is excellent, did we really need to have science curriculum or science activities in our museum? If there is a wonderful world class art museum down the street the other direction, why would we have anything to do with art, or even culture for that matter? You could extend

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

that analogy to: well there's a great opera in town, there's a great symphony, there's a great ballet, why on earth would we have any of those offerings at the museum either even though we have an auditorium with 166 seats in it? So that first year that I was here I think it gave an excuse to the organization to ask questions that perhaps would not have been asked had a long term leader who had led them to that position still been in place. So by bringing in new leadership I think every organization, I know that's not exactly the question you asked but it really leaves the fact that the first activities or projects that I took on I think really related to the fact that the board and the organization itself saw that as a moment in time to ask really hard questions and to give us permission to question ourselves.

AB: What would you say is the most difficult aspect of running this museum?

TK: We are very volatile. We are almost combustible because we are always trying... we are learning institution, we are always trying to stay ahead of the pack and be a place that rewards innovation, ingenuity, creative ideas so that that is seen in the programming and exhibits we offer but also that kind of organization internally so we can attract and retain those kinds of thinkers. So when you have... when you are always trying to get the next best idea and that you are essentially research and development organization running with very little resources because so many of our resources are directly connected to the care and feeding of 650,000 people who come in the door every year, it is very difficult. In other words if you want to be an amusement park and just deliver a great experience you could do that and you could do it on a relatively modest budget. But if you really want to push the boundaries on learning opportunities and bringing to a very complex varied population all the great things that will help stimulate their thinking and unleash

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

their capacity then you are pushing yourself in a territory that is almost unreal and that's probably the biggest challenge of keeping people from being burned out, of attracting the best and the brightest when you can't pay, you know, tenured professor salaries, not that they make a lot of money either, but you just get the idea. So that's the biggest, most difficult thing with the _____ (13.5) being how do you measure results? How do you know that you're creative or that you are cutting edge or that you are staying ahead of the game when your mission is directly connected to the needs of a very unique population? So goal congruency and understanding what I think is good is it what other people think or value as being good and how do you translate that into organization objectives?

AB: Are a lot of the exhibits that are currently here permanent exhibits or do you have traveling ones as well?

TK: We have traveling exhibits. In fact, we make a lot of money each year off the fact that we develop exhibits and then travel them to other museums, science centers, children's museums. The exhibits that we have here... we don't really use the term permanent anymore and we don't really think of them being exhibits in the traditional sense. We think of them as being platforms for learning and in fact, with the expansion museum that we have for next March, we are literally doubling the size of the museum, we are referring to these exhibits as platforms, not as exhibits, and we are referring to them in terms of their fixed cost. For instance probably the most powerful exhibit that we are bringing on line is an exhibit that has less than 35% of its total couple million dollar cost as fixed. That's a real dramatic departure for most museums who build an infrastructure and sometimes put into the infrastructure pretty static exhibits. And I'm

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

not, again, insulting a great work of art or dinosaur bones or something that is clearly irreplaceable history or cultural artifact as being static, but on the other hand we are focusing on the process of learning. By focusing on the process of learning and by being a place that literally in an internet driven society for information is a click away, what is the relevance of a museum? So we are trying to put as much of our resources in the direct people to people learning and away from the infrastructure or the bricks and mortar as possible.

AB: Are all the exhibits hands on?

TK: Yeah they are all touchable and its interesting because hands on has been sort of abused over the last twenty or thirty years. I think the idea that you could touch something was really radical maybe in my grandparent's generation. Slowly the idea that for people to experience and learn it requires all sensory involvement has become widely accepted. The idea I think in some less sophisticated organizations is that hands on means push a button or do something and get a reaction. It's more that we are going for open ended learning so that it's not a matter of coming into the museum and touching the same button and always getting the same reaction. The kids of exhibits and the platforms that we are doing now for learning are really focusing on game playing, role playing, constantly changing the information that's challenging or causing people to think or question. They are also increasingly environments created in museums, particularly here, where the public can interact with each other in a meaningful way so that the experiences is literally changing according to the mix of people that happen to be sharing the space and experience with you at that moment.

AB: How do you gauge their reaction to it?

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie**Interview Date: July 2, 2008**

TK: There have been books and books enough to fill libraries written about museum experiences and it is really interesting because it usually and they really are industry based publications so that if you are not in the museum world you probably don't know that all museums, even the most stayed traditional under resourced historical museum out in the middle of nowhere still has criteria by which it has to judge whether or not people have meaningful take away experiences. Are they really learning or understanding the message? But in our case and particularly in science centers and children's museums we've actually adhered to a "best practices" that has been developed with a lot of investment by the Institute of Museum Library Services at the National Science Foundation and even the National Institute of Health. It's all out comes logic. It's more like a social agency, a social services agency that looks for evaluations connecting the initial investment to outputs and outcomes, of course when you are talking about learning your talking about outcomes. So we have a pretty sophisticated self evaluation tool and then periodically we will pick a hand full of programs that we deploy annually that we will bring in external evaluators. There is one particular team out of Chicago that is very important to us because they are comfortable in English and Spanish, in fact the principal grew up in Mexico which is still the predominance of our Latin population here in Houston and so because of her cultural competency and her other expertise, when she comes in she gives this incredibly rich understanding of how our programming is working. So it goes a lot beyond just: Are the people coming in the door? Do they seem to be engaged? By the way we also take pen and paper surveys weekly, virtual daily just to make sure that we are keeping up with the expectations of our visitors but when it comes to this more sophisticated learning behavior evaluation and ultimately tracking

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie**Interview Date: July 2, 2008**

people through time to see if learning messages were retained and acted upon or if there were behavior changes, that takes some pretty sophisticated evaluation and we invest in that.

AB: In what ways do you feel The Children's Museum contributes to the overall educational experience of the children who visit?

TK: It's interesting in Houston we have one of the highest rates of functional illiteracy in the entire United States among large cities. We have only about 50% to 51% of our population that is considered functionally illiterate. So we are working with a community of people that are basically reading at the 4th grade level, reading and comprehending at the 4th grade level. We have a large number of people who are functionally illiterate because they weren't taught to read Spanish or whatever home country language they were speaking because they were denied the ability to have education themselves. So our role really to transform communities is to work with families to engage them and first learning that can occur between the parent and the child. We respect the fact that parents want to be the very best parents for their children regardless of their own educational achievement and our programming which we deliver to about 120 sites around Houston and low income communities on a monthly basis that we are reaching the people who need the most in mathematics, you know, early mathematics, early science, early reading, parent engagement, ways to discipline children, ways to encourage children and that's all coming out of programming that we have tested at our main location at 1500 Binz and evaluated and then deployed in the community. Our staff are fluent English and Spanish. 40% of all of our public contact staff are fluent English and Spanish and about 90% of our public outreach staff are fluent English and Spanish. We have other language

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie**Interview Date: July 2, 2008**

capacity too but we at least have an organizational commitment to those two languages. So it is really important for us to not be a governmental agency, to not be an agency that is going to turn people in because of their immigration status or whatever. We just don't get into any of that. We are just here to help people and importantly to help children. If we can particularly reach children when they are still young and young in this case we are really defining 12 and younger but really most of our outreach programming is for children 8 and younger because we are really working with parents from kindergarten to about third or fourth grade, we know that we can improve children's self esteem. We have the evaluations to back us up that literally if kids can have meaningful interaction either at the Children's Museum or in the programming that we are delivering in the community, particularly if the parents are with them. If the parents aren't with them the programming still makes a difference in the children's ability to see themselves as successful learners and literally that stays with them throughout life. We are not suggesting that we are going to make algebra and sixth grade easier but we are suggesting that if a child has the scaffolding opportunity to make connections about why mathematics actually impacts their ability to solve problems, their ability to enjoy life, then they are going to have more personal motivation to learn algebra when they first hit those first difficult problems that they may face in a testing situation. Here, because it's a no fault learning environment, they are pretty much free to experiment and hopefully we provided for programming and our staff facilitation enough support that failure is actually celebrated it's an opportunity to learn more it's not something to be afraid of. We know that we have a real impact on the children as a result of this.

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

AB: In those testing and evaluation programs could you describe for me what exactly they are looking for?

TK: We literally sit down before we do a program, whether it is an exhibit program in the galleries or if it is a program in the community. We start out with: how many people we hope to reach? Which people we hope we are reaching? That is clearly very important if we are going into a geographic area of Houston and then we look at the outcomes. We may be trying to do an after school program for parents in which we want an outcome where at least 85% of the parents say they got 5 or more new ideas to help children do math at home. We will literally put “do math” in quotes because we want to get across some concepts that it is not just, you know, doing better on your math test this week but that math is an **intrigal** part, just like reading, you should be math literate just you are literate to be able to read anything, the same with science. So we literally are trying to gauge – in most cases is family learning occurring? It gets much more difficult to evaluate in class learning. Most of the programming that we do is out of class. We will do it at YMCA’s. We do it at after school sites. We do it at boys and girls clubs. We do it with families. Rarely do we actually go into a classroom and deploy a program to improve TAAS tests. A couple of times our programs have been picked up and used that way and their test results were amazing and we didn’t even know they were doing it. But it is not really the stock and trade of what the museum does. We more exist in that out of class learning time and we are going to look for indicators like: do the parents say that they increased by at least 10% per day the time that they read to their children? Those are the kids of outcome goals that we are looking for. Then we go back later on, independent of The Children’s Museum so we try to get as unbiased response as possible,

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

that is where our outside evaluators come in, and those evaluators will find out if the parents turned on the TV and let their kids sit in front of the TV or did they read a book to them?

AB: How do you feel each educational platform as you put it caters to each child's individual learning experience?

TK: Well it's interesting we look at how it garners multiple intelligences. Then we look also and we send our educators to Dr. Mel Lavine's program. Mel was one of Howard Gardner's partners at Harvard and he is now at UNC, Chapel Hill, but he has taken this idea that we all have different learning strengths and different learning abilities to a very sophisticated level to the point that he is influencing policy makers in a number of states, including Texas in terms of public school education and the tools that educators need in classroom environments to address different learning styles. At The Children's Museum obviously when we are working with a family periodically and sporadically as opposed to you know watching a child mature say over a school year in a classroom setting, the indicators are going to be far different but we have literally developed analyses that show us the learning behaviors and then we test learning outcomes afterwards. These are all through the filter of different kinds of learning styles. We know that some people are kinetic learners; some are visual learners... by the way you are not interviewing the right person to answer this because I am not an educator. We have a whole group of people that do that that are a lot smarter than I am. But what I have seen is us take what I think are the best practices in terms of understanding how people learn and the wide variety of learners. Everybody learns differently so it is kind of scary to even stereotype us as "category of learners" but for practical purposes that's

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

what you have to do. Then we literally go through the galleries on a quarterly basis looking for how we have brought in new learning experiences. How we may have subtracted some that maybe we want to bring back and they are literally are, it's like counting notches on a belt, we literally go under each one of these categories that Mel Levine describes, we also have our own categories that spring out of our own understanding in the way that we sort of modify what Howard Gardner does and then we walk step by step through that to measure if we have enough learning activities that relate to specific content areas that support the overall process. So I can't verbally tell you very well but we have all kinds of charts and analyses that prove that we do this. And we have to because that's the kind of process that we as a learning organization made up of learners that are trying to create a learning environment for others and those are the kinds of tools we have to have.

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AB: You mentioned a lot of educational theory that went into it, can you describe what the education department is doing about these platforms?

TK: Yeah. First of all and this is kind of wild to think about but in most museums the education department is separate from the people that design the exhibits. Of course here all of that stuff, everything really that goes on inside the walls of the museum is the direct responsibility of our education department. So our educators are literally using their vision, their best experiences and their knowledge and their day to day involvement with visitors to plan and develop our exhibits. So 40% of all of our educator's time (ideally it doesn't always work out this way) but ideally 40% of all of our educator's time is spent in the galleries with the public so that they are literally testing. For instance we prototype

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

everything we do in the museum before it goes out into a full production value. We will put, you know people find this hard to believe but it cost about \$500 a square foot to prototype, develop and built and maintain an exhibit. It's a lot of money. Before we ever get to that level of execution and the best way to test something is for our educators to do pen and paper experiments with people that come through the doors. We will sit down at one of our many activity stations and say, "We are thinking about developing this new neat program on math or nanotechnology or whatever, would you mind working with us?" Most people are delighted to participate in something like this. So we sit down and we start pushing around ideas. We work with advisors, all of this is under the direct supervision of our educators. Then the educators begin to develop prototypes.

Prototypes are nothing more... for instance we have ATM machines, or a kind of ATM machine that is going to be in the new exhibit about civic engagement and financial literacy.

AB: Money bill?

TK: Well that's an exhibit that is coming, we are actually going to do one that is longer term but you're right. To do these little ATM type machines we actually use cardboard boxes and we had people standing behind them who did the function of the machine. Everybody got a big kick out of it but as a result of our prototyping over a couple of months last year we learned all types of things that we wouldn't have if we hadn't literally asked people to participate with us in that way. So everything we do here... and for instance on our nanotechnology room we actually spent \$35,000 which in the grand scheme of building, you know, a long term exhibit for a museum is not that much money, but we spent about \$35,000 which is a fraction of what most would have

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie**Interview Date: July 2, 2008**

cost to see if people could understand the concepts we were advancing and indeed they could not initially. So we had to keep refining and refining and refining. There is actually an area over in the museum right now which is a workshop and literally what we are doing is prototyping and testing everything that will go into our expanded museum; so all of that is under the educator's prevue. They have unlimited access to the public in a way as our test group and are encouraged normally to work with the public on site but also in the various communities around Houston that we serve.

AB: What are some of your favorite exhibits that you have on display?

TK: Well my favorite one is one we are going to bring back for a long term installation and this is Invention Convention. There is a guy at MIT named Mitch Reznick who talks about lifelong kindergarten as opposed to life long learning. Of course his emphasis is that the way we learn in kindergarten by trial and error and sort of this unbranded thrill of learning, "we are not afraid to fail" that that is the way that learning should occur. Mitch is the one that developed the programmable legos, mindstorms. Then he developed a nonproprietary version that he shared with five museums and we were one of them in the country. And these little programmable chips can basically do anything. You know if you want to invent an invention you would probably need this little microchip to, you know, make your machine run or whatever you are building. Well what we are going to be doing and we have been prototyping this for years is get basically an unlimited amount of legos in a room and kids working with the local chapter of the National Inventor's Society can build basically whatever kind of machine or gadget or gear or whirly gig that they want to. We have been doing this with... by the way we borrowed this idea directly from the Minnesota Children's Museum... or not the Children's Museum but the Science

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

Center who is also one of the institutions that Mitch has been working with for years.

But they had just really simple parts for a robotic type device and I think for \$1.50 you could buy it and take it home otherwise you just play with it in the museum. Well

Invention Convention is going to be filled with that kind of learning opportunity. That is the thing I get most excited about because I think when you have people that are passionate about what they do and are knowledgeable like the local chapter of the National Inventor Society, to have them actually interacting with kids is such a great gift.

To be able to make this possible, Invention Convention, is something really important.

AB: When is that coming?

TK: It's going to be opened in March but we've had it on and off. This is in fact I think the first summer that we really haven't had it here. Although in a couple of weeks we are going to have a celebration one week we call Mindfest. What Mindfest is, is basically taking the programming of Invention Convention and deploying it throughout the museum even without the gallery space created for it. This will open in March of 2009 and will be here every day but always changing.

AB: My brothers will love that!

TK: Good! Get them here!

AB: Yes I will.

TK: When they come to visit.

AB: What kind of marketing techniques do you use?

TK: Yeah we don't have much money. It's interesting because we only charge \$5.00 and 34% of the people who come in the door are free. So it's not like, you know... and by the way Houston is one of the most costly cost per thousand media markets in the

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

United States. So it is really costly to try to use advertising here. Well the good news/bad news is that the market that we are after which is basically young grandparents and young parents are all turning to the internet. They are not using the traditional media. So the only media that is really effective is going to be broadcast media, because it's delivered on a screen, and the internet. In fact we have been running a promotion for free gas because summer gas prices are spiking so high right now and we are finding that we are getting great downloads on that offer from the internet and we are running that and the major daily newspaper that I will not quote (but you know who it is) and unfortunately no one is bringing it in and yet we are getting hundreds downloaded from the internet. So I think it really shows us that ultimately the way we communicate and the way we promote the museum is going to have to be in the medium of choice. Broadcast is really too expensive unless it is donated to us by one of the stations or Comcast who is the cable provider. Yes we have all kinds of close relationships with them. But for us to control our message and to explain what we are... particularly with as complex as what we are and with as much change in programming the frequency of changing... we are always something new everyday. How do you communicate that? Well it's going to take the medium like the internet and we are basically shifting our resources right now away from the printed page, you know whatever version it comes in, to the internet.

AB: Can you talk about a few exhibits that are on display now: The Planet Earth is it Planet Earth?

TK: Yes. My Home Planet Earth is an exhibit that actually we have been traveling for a number of years. We brought it out about five years ago. It is collaboration between us

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie**Interview Date: July 2, 2008**

and Baylor College of Medicine. Baylor, and a lot of folks don't realize this, had the most incredible team of educators not only working with the med students you know and the scientists who are getting doctoral degrees there, but also a team of educators that works with public school educators or secondary and primary school educators. So basically they had developed the curriculum which still to this day is the most popular third grade curriculum on environment health in the history of environmental health in the United States or whatever and they commissioned a former Disney illustrator to bring it to life. So you had this great concept of these two little squirrels a boy and girl squirrel that are cousins and they live in Bright Water Corner, I can't even really say it, and they are basically running around with all these other characters in the community, including Mr. Slap Tail who is this really funny, cranky old cross guy (he is actually a Beaver) and he has terrible indoor air quality where he lives and maybe he doesn't eat the healthiest foods. He smokes a pipe you know all those kinds of things. The whole exhibit which is designed to bring to life these books, these curriculum series developed by Baylor College of Medicine is about Rip and Rosy, the cousin squirrels solving all of the mysteries in their community. The mysteries had to do with water pollution, air pollution and unhealthy food and all these other things that we do that make ourselves less than healthy. The great thing about it is its real science. It is based on real facts. It is really important stuff. I think... well we know that it's changed the behaviors of children. Because when you come to the museum, and one of the great things about being a museum, it sounds like I'm sort of anti-museum because I keep talking about how we are not like traditional museums, but what the AAM, the American Association of Museums, all the surveys for a gazillion decades have proven is that the American public even in

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

this time of web based learning, still views Museums as places where they can get accurate information, that they can get real knowledge. So when you have these messages in a place like The Children's Museum about all the things that can cause asthma or different things that we deal with in our health issues, it really makes a difference in choices that people make ultimately. So that exhibit My Home Planet Earth is about and it will be something that travels to Houston periodically. We have, as you know, high rates of childhood asthma and we have a lot of other environmental concerns that kids need and their families need to be more informed about so they can be healthier ultimately.

AB: What kind of behaviors have you noticed the reactions to the ?

TK: Kids eating better. Kids thinking about how clean their room is and that maybe they should listen to mom and clean out their rooms. The take away values on that have also been towards water. The concern about what may be in their water, watching the news more critically. Learning about if there is a spill in the water... recently in Houston there was a local company that was accused of dropping I think battery acid or something into the storm sewer in Houston. That has picked up as relevance in something that kids understand that are now through the relevance of something they have learned in My Home Planet Earth, just in general learning basic science questions, learning the science habits of mind. When you go through My Home Planet Earth in addition to getting these meta messages that Baylor wants kids and families to know there is also just basic experimentation: step 1, step 2, step 3 how do you ask a question, find an answer, how do you do science experimentation? That is also in there and that is an important value of the exhibit as well.

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

AB: What sensitivities if any do you have to take into consideration when planning or with the exhibits you have currently?

TK: Well Houston has, as I said one of the highest rates of children population, but also one of the highest rates of child poverty. As much as 27% of kids birth through 12 are living at or below poverty in Houston. 47% of all women having babies last year in Houston have less than 12 years of education. As I said earlier we have immigrants from all over the world, particularly in developing countries where people are coming with very little educational attainment so they come here and they are doing fairly meaningless I shouldn't say meaningless but you know menial is the word I mean tasks to survive.

You know they provide their own labor to projects around Houston and that is how they get paid. So first of all you have to be really careful about not just ethnic stereotypes or anything like that. We are ... that is just not an issue I think maybe it is in some cities where you don't have a dynamic population like we do. But we do have to be sensitive about... I think one time one of our [REDACTED] working with a school tour said, you know "if you don't learn math or you don't learn science you may just end up digging ditches." That was certainly nothing authorized that we would want her to say but sure enough there was a child in the group whose dad works for landscape company and he digs irrigation ditches and it really upset the child and I don't blame them. One of the games that we have tested in the Kidropolis Exhibit where children are going to learn to balance budgets and vote for a city budget as well as their own personal budget and we had a game playing about how much money you would need to save in order to take your new dog to the vet. We thought that was harmless enough but in the prototyping we discovered there was one dad that just got really upset because he had just moved his

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

family here from El Salvador and they were barely making ends meet and they could not have a pet because they really couldn't afford a pet and here he was at The Children's Museum and The Children's Museum was telling this child that she should have a pet and moreover she should take her pet to the veterinarian clinic. So that's the kind of sensitivity we have. Sometimes we get into culture clashes because we are sort of like a U.N. I saw a really interesting altercation between a woman who had come to the museum. Her husband was from I think from Spain, originally from Spain, he was getting his Ph.D. at Rice and then there was a woman who had her Ph.D. from Harvard and they were arguing over whether or not children should be allowed to run around outside without a diaper on or something bazaar like that. So there are those kinds of situations that develop but for the most part we just want to be really respectful of all people, which we are on the surface but we may not realize that for instance that a family was not having a pet because they couldn't afford it and what an emotional subject that was. We were just oblivious to that. That is one of the reasons that we prototype so much because you never know what you are going to find out and you certainly want to do no harm. You don't want to put parents in an uncomfortable position, a painful position. In the case of the vet we are going to go ahead and have a vet clinic and kids can pretend to do that but we are trying to back off any decision or any of the questions or answering sessions that might imply different socioeconomic status of families but it's not easy to do.

AB: While I was walking through the museum I was looking at things like The Kid Lift that you have that is so adorable by the way and the face painting table. What kind of precautions do you have to take as far as safety?

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

TK: That is a really good question. First of all germs are a huge thing and it is interesting because my children are in their early 20's now and I was a germ phobic but not like today because now we have bird flu and we have all kinds of strange viruses and I don't blame them. First of all with the kid lift that is an activity where kids can hoist themselves up and it is to test different pulleys and to test different simple machines. That is more of a physical injury kind of safety issue. The particular lift that you saw we actually purchased from a company that just specializes in testing and trying all that kind of basically playground equipment so that is one layer of concern. The other level is very hard to control but we do everything we possibly can and that is germs. When we walk in the door, no we are not testing you to see if you are running a fever or if you are coughing and hacking, although most people don't cough and hack in public anymore because even in the ten plus years I have been in The Children's Museum I think what is considered an acceptable behavior has changed and people are concerned to be around people that seem to be outwardly sick. We have... first of all we treat the museum as if it were a child care center which means that we wash everything down at the close of business with a bleach and water solution which is what is used in child care facilities around the world. In the tot spot area which is for early childhood, three and younger and babies are drooling and putting things in their mouths we actually have containers and we tell the parents to please take the items that their children touch or in mouth and put them immediately away into the red containers which indicate contamination... possible contamination versus the clean containers where we ask the parents to pull the toys from and all of those have been scrubbed and are antiseptic. By the way in Tot Spot, that particular area is wiped down with bleach and water every two hours. The carpets that

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie**Interview Date: July 2, 2008**

we use are the kinds of carpets that don't pick up bacteria. They are considered anti-bacterial. But there is no such thing as anti-bacterial carpet so I hate to use that term but it is a carpet that is marketed to hospitals and other places with early childhood populations, so it is as good as you can get. In the early childhood space again we put surgical scrub boots, you know the little green booties on feet. We either ask you to remove your shoes or we ask you to cover your shoes with those surgical booties because any place like that in a museum where children are down on the floor, we want to protect the floor as much as possible. In fact in our expanded building we are going to have that early childhood space all on it's own floor which will make it even easier for us to maintain. We even circulate the air in the museum, in order to save on energy costs most public places don't circulate the air, or you don't breath fresh air you are basically breathing air that has been recycled through the building and here we actually have less efficiency in our HVAC system because we consciously are circulating fresh air at a much higher rate through the museum every day in case that there are airborne germs. Now in terms of face paints, you made the comment about people marking on their faces. There is one company in the entire world, it is a company out of Switzerland I believe and it is the only source from which you can get Crayola shaped face paints. We changed those little containers out throughout the day. We have little sponges and little dishes that have water because the Crayola's or these face paints need to get wet when you use them. We thank goodness have not have one complaint in the entire time I have been here of any transmission of any kind of skin disease or whatever. So we have been very fortunate in that since... but we are constantly monitoring it and changing it out. That's not to say that sometime it won't happen. But honestly there are museums in the United

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

States without this kind of vigilance that end up having real problems. We have had situations in the museum where someone has vomited or someone has had a nose bleed and there has been a lot of blood and we have a very specific protocol that we go through to immediately, essentially shut down that part of the museum, a staff go in and treat it not unlike a hospital situation where you clean bodily fluids, you treat them all as being toxic because you have no choice but to do that and you just pick up and go on from there. But we clean like a cross between a hospital and a child care facility basically, in order to maintain the cleanliness of the institution.

AB: Is there a limit to the amount of children are allowed in the museum at a time?

TK: There is but it's crowded. I know it's more... in fact we do daily surveys and the only complaint that we consistently get is that we are too crowded and that is why we are doubling the size of the museum. We have... I believe it is 1,350 people simultaneously in the museum and we do have a clicker at the front door that is managing that. The times when we have to block the museum are when we are doing a big fun special thing like Halloween or on Thursday nights when we are open for free and then we have to hold the people outside the building and it is really unpleasant because unbearably it's a hot day when you are holding people outside but we do have to resort to that.

AB: How do you prevent kids from taking stuff?

TK: We don't.

AB: You don't?

TK: Hopefully they aren't walking out with stuff but if they take it... the greatest example we had several hundred pumpkins ranging in size from little bitty pumpkins to people size pumpkins in a pumpkin patch a few years ago. Within the first week over

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

half of them disappeared. People put them in strollers, you know children had them in their hands and they just walked out. It is a constant cost to us to have to replace items.

AB: How many visitors do you have on average weekly?

TK: Well it varies. We average about 1,200 a day on a slow day and we can do as many as 8,000 people a day on a busy day depending on the turnover. So whatever that works out to. We do about 625,000 attendance annually. Right now it has dropped down a little bit because we are under construction. But we figure a year once we open will be about 750,000 a year and the busiest times are when kids are out of school so it is summer, it's spring break, its Christmas holiday, Thanksgiving. Interestingly during the summer the weekends are actually less crowded because normally people go down to Galveston or they go have fun at the beach or whatever and we are not seeing that happen as much this year. Attendance on weekends is up because people I don't think are traveling out of town as much because of gas prices.

AB: How many volunteers do you have here on a regular basis?

TK: Thousands. We literally have a team of I think its about 3,500 people. The reason that there is so many is because since we have our staff actually working with the children so that... you know the problem is you have to do background checks on volunteers if you were to allow volunteers to have sole responsibility for working with children. So rather than put people through that we already have staffing so we blend volunteers sort of shoulder to shoulder with our paid staff. That way if there were any serious situation, you know if we could tell there was erratic behavior we would immediately remove the volunteer. We are not... we are very selective about our volunteers but the way we get a lot of volunteers too is so many of the kids now in high

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie

Interview Date: July 2, 2008

school have requirements to serve... serve the public, you know do volunteer service so we have a lot of teens and college kids as well as basically young moms that make up the majority of our volunteers. We also have a large retiree pool and then corporate Houston is always looking for things to do where “the entire accounting department wants to come out and do something on one day.” So they kind of supervise themselves with our assistance. That is how we get the volunteer members.

AB: Do you offer internships?

TK: We do. We don't do them in a formal way. Usually if someone calls us and says they have a particular activity they are interest in learning about could they come and work with us, we will make it possible. We definitely have used the interns in the marketing and fundraising area though, that has been very helpful.

AB: What do you think the future holds for The Children's Museum?

TK: I think for the next two years it is going to be very challenging for us because we are going to have short term adjustments in the business capacity as we bring on line the doubling of the museum just as our economy is really pretty week. Even though we say we are in Houston and we are not affected by rising gas prices there are issues. We are seeing in general the same kind of economic impact of people cutting back on leisure time spending and so forth and people having to work more jobs in order to have income and that cuts back on their ability to bring their family here. In the long run I think the museum will continue to thrive with Houston. We are a young city, the projections show that we are going to continue to have young families with young children. I think Houston is turning from a manufacturing mentality, which I think it still has, to a mentality that celebrates the intellectual achievements and the creativity and the

Interviewee: Kahn, Tammie**Interview Date: July 2, 2008**

innovation of people. We will become more like Austin and San Francisco and less like Pittsburg or another city that would be manufacturing. I even like to say Detroit because Detroit right now seems to be going through a [REDACTED]. I think Houston, even though it celebrates all people and is very accepting of people from different cultural backgrounds and from around the world, I don't think we know how to invest in people or how to move ourselves ahead beyond an engineering and manufacturing mentality. I think that's changing so I think The Children's Museum will be very much a place and a station of the values that will become increasing important to this city.

AB: What is the most important thing that you want people to know who have never visited this museum before?

TK: That we are not like a traditional museum where you are taught about something. That hopefully you are going to have an opportunity to learn something about yourself and the way you learn. That is probably the most important that they should know since they will be encouraged come be a part of this place because it's fun and if they don't come they are missing out.

AB: Is there anything else you would like to add?

TK: No this has been fun I appreciate it.

AB: Thank you so much.

End of interview