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Meet Our Museum Podcast: Sit In

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Audio-only Podcast online at: <http://americanhistory.si.edu/thinkfinity/podcast/sitin.mp3>

Codes:

MR = Matt Ringelstetter

XC = Xavier Carnegie

“ “ =interrupting, pause

[] = not speaker's words

MR = Creating a connection between museum visitors and history can often be a difficult task. How do you get someone to personally relate with an event or object from 50, 100 or even 200 years ago? One of the ways the National Museum of American History attempts to better engage the public is through the use of unique live performances here on the museum floor. In this month's History Explorer podcast I'll be speaking with Xavier Carnegie an actor here at the museum who has been involved with several different historic theater programs. Xavier discusses his role as a civil rights activist in the Join the Students Sit-Ins Program (JSSP) and how that program specifically attempts to teach history through personal engaging theatre.

XC = My name is Samuel Xavier Carnegie and I started out here as an actor, for I guess about four and a half years, and did various programs including the JSSP which is the one I guess I've kind of been the most associated with and then recently I became kind of in charge of all the theatre programs. The title is Creative Director and that means a lot of different things. I'm still acting but also I'm helping to come up with new ideas for

new programs, writing new programs and directing new programs. I'm putting together all the stuff that we need for new theatre programs.

MR = That's great. And you mentioned the Student Sit-ins Program and that's probably one of the most popular programs here at the museum. Why don't you talk a little bit about what that is and then what your role within that program has been.

XC = Alright. Well, JSSP is about a 20-25 minute program, um, that is, its primary function is to educate people about the Greensborough Sit-Ins in 1960. And, so, I guess for most people who know their history, they've heard about it, but basically these four guys who were really kids at the time they were 18 years old, 17 years old they decided to take action to try to desegregate the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensborough, NC. Now these guys were students at North Carolina A & T? University so what they did on was on Feb 1, 1960 they walked into this Woolworth's store and sat down at the lunch counter. The lunch counter was for whites only and they were all African American. So they sat there and when the waitresses and manager told them to leave, they didn't leave. They just sat there. And they basically said, you know what, we have money, we'd like to eat here, we're just as good as anybody else and this is business that you could have and we're not hurting anyone, we're not messing anything up. We're just sitting here and we're going to sit here until we're served. They weren't served that first day but when other people heard about it, they joined in. Lots and lots of people, hundreds of people took part in this sit-in which eventually was successful.

Chris Wilson who kind of heads up a lot of our public programs things especially our theatre stuff and is also the director of the Program in African American Culture he just kind of said, well we have this artifact we have a piece of this lunch counter, a real piece of the lunch counter here, we've had it for years, we're re-opening. The museum was closed for about two years to be renovated and he kind of was thinking what's something cool that we could with this to really educate people and also to really show them how big of a deal this was and he came up with the idea to have a mock sit-in kind of training to get people in the seats and have them pretend to be sitting in and then to ask them how'd that make you feel and from that he came up with this whole script where in the

show, Join the Student Sit-ins, I play the part of a sit-in trainer. So I would be training a group of people who said, "We want to take part in the sit-in. What do we have to do?" And I'm their trainer and say well these are the things you need to do and this is what you have to know, this is what you have to expect. Now, why don't we practice. You four people come on up here sit in these seats and everyone else stand behind them and we're going to give them an idea of what they have to expect them to do.

Trainer = "You know I heard we're going to be getting a lot of new soldiers for this army we're creating but I had no idea I would have this many recruits. I have my work cut out for me getting you all trained, but I'm not complaining at all. You're important. Each and every one of you is essential if we're going to be successful. So, are you all ready for your first sit-in?"

Group = "Yes. Yeah."

Trainer = How 'bout it? You ready to go?

Group = "Yes. Yeah."

Trainer = No, no you're not ready yet. Look, you can't just walk in here and sit down and order lunch and expect to change anything. You got to be prepared, you got to be motivated, and you got to be trained. So that's what we're going to do today. We're going to get you all ready to stand up by sitting down and we're going to get you prepared to be as active and strong and powerful as you've ever been and probably ever will be all by being passive and non-violent.

MR = How's the audience reaction to this type of program?

XC = The emotional response can be a lot especially since there are a lot of people still alive who remember the sit ins and who remember a time in this country when things were very different and so when they see that commemorated at the museum I think a lot of people it triggers something emotionally in them. Some people you know they

don't they don't really...the show is very interactive and so I think a lot of people are uncomfortable with the amount of response that we expect from them. We ask them a lot of questions we really get...I'll sit right next to people in the audience you know talk to them one on one, ask them questions, and even put them on the spot and sometimes people are a little uncomfortable with that but I think in light of the history that we're trying to get across most people kind of understand why we're being so engaging and so one on one with them.

MR = How do you bring the audience into this story? What's going on that you feel helps them really connect with this historical moment?

XC = You know one thing that we do...it's really funny and interesting that you ask that question because it's a very difficult thing for many people to connect with the past on a certain level especially for what we're trying to do with theatre. We're really trying to pull people in to 1960 which is really difficult to do especially for somebody who wasn't alive then. So one of the things we try to do is we try to really talk to people in the way that they can respond as they would today even though we want them to understand that it's 1960 you know there's certain things that are kind of universal and certain experiences that are universal so it's really interesting when you ask people questions. For example, in the script it's written very well. If I ask you what you think if when somebody says nonviolent, what do you think of, and see questions like that are pretty universal because I think for many people the answer that they would have given in 1960 is the same as the answer they would give today with certain differences. For example, if I were to ask that of someone right now, they might say Nelson Mandela. Whereas, in 1960, you might not say Nelson Mandela even if you know something about him. So, we get a few, sometimes we get answers and people are thinking of today but you're still going to say Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. You're still going to say Gandhi. You're still going to say peace you're still going to say no fighting, passivism. All these things are things that you could connect with wherever you are and whenever you were born. And, so in that way, I think by asking people those kind of questions and really kind of getting them to understand we want you to be honest we want your honest answers because these answers work regardless of what time period we're talking about

and the cool thing about that is that later on when we discuss it with people we kind of have a spring board to kind of say let's not just talk about the history let's talk about now because we make history every day and so a lot of the choices that we make and the things that we learn about influence history as we make it and those are the kind of, I think, the things that getting people to think about that really helps them to connect even though all this happened 50 years ago. It really gets them to connect well with them.

MR = What type of research goes into producing theatre performances say at a museum like the Student Sit-ins.

XC = Sure. A lot. A lot. Now the thing is I'm very lucky that there's also a lady her name is Azania she does the program as well. The two of us are very, very fortunate. And, the reason for that is because in terms of first-account source material we actually have video and film of people doing these things the very things that we're portraying. Because of that we have it a lot easier than someone say who is doing something that is set in 1770s, you know, and they really do have to be on their Ps and Qs in terms of reading it all and there are lots of resources for those people but we are very fortunate to have those resources and I can't stress research enough and we found a lot of those things, there's a lot of video and there's a lot of it that's free online that you can see but we also some on DVD, we have recordings of people talking. You know one of the best things for me doing this to have is to actually have the people that this involved speaking either on mic or on camera speaking about their experiences. That's really cool because you get not only kind of the cadence and the things you want for an actor and the history the things you want as a historian but you really can kind of see the passion that these people had that at the end of the day these people were really putting their well-being on the line to change the country and what does that look like? When somebody does that, what does it look like? How does it feel and these are the things that are important for us to hit as both a historian and an actor because the feeling is what you're trying to get at. If you're doing a program, it doesn't matter if it's an artifact on an exhibit wall, it doesn't matter if it's a theatre program, it doesn't matter if it's an outside performance some kind of musical performance. Whatever it is, you really are trying to touch

someone emotionally. It's not just the academic part. The academic part is great but if that's all you want you can just read a few books, go online. We actually show someone that these are the ruby slippers, this is a piece of an old house that someone lived in during the Revolutionary War. This is a theatre piece where someone is portraying someone from history or even someone fictional during a historical time period. You're really trying to tug at someone's heart strings. So, how do you do that? For us as actors having this wealth of resources that we have has been really great because these things affect us emotionally so if I can see what this person in 1960 was doing and what their feelings were and what their emotions were and what that made other people feel like surrounding them, taking that and being able to use that as a research source is really, really great. Obviously you want to read as much as you can. I got to tell you I'm learning something new at least every other day about these sit-ins. I'm learning new names, something new that happened, and you want to do that because people will ask questions and they really want to know. Some things we don't know and some things are very, very hard for us to figure out but I kind of want to go the extra mile to figure those things out as much as I can because these are things that people really want to know and really want to ask and it brings up all these issues that now we can take and use today whether it's just learning something or whether its someone you never know who you meet who is going to talk to someone else or who knows someone else who really is trying to do something to move this country forward and what we can learn from these guys is really, really cool. It's a lot of work and it never ends. You're always constantly looking at new things, making sure your information is right, learning new information but at the end of the day it's cool because that what helps the program grow and stay fresh in my mind is learning those new things.

MR = It sounds like you're using a lot of traditional research methods, you know, reading and using oral histories, that the history process is not that different from something that would be going on in the classroom or people doing research but the product is a little different.

XC = Right.

MR = The final historical product that you are producing. Well thanks for being on the show. This has been great.

XC = No problem. Thanks for having me.

MR = That was Xavier Carnegie discussing his role in historic theatre here at the National Museum of American History. Be sure to join us again next month on the History Explorer Podcast as we take another look into what goes on behind the scenes here at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. This podcast has been made possible by a grant from the Verizon Foundation.