

Q&A with Diana Pardue

Interviewed by Andrea Appleton

Since 1985, Diana Pardue has worked with two of the United States' most treasured symbols. She is chief of the museum services division at the Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island in New York City. She is also active with the International Council of Museums. Pardue will be one of the panelists in the Alan J. Friedman Science Center Dialogue on October 23 at the 2017 ASTC Annual Conference. She spoke with *Dimensions* about how immigration interpretation has changed over time and the role of immigration museums in this political moment.

Diana, you've worked with the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island since 1985. You helped restore the Statue and develop the immigration museum on Ellis Island. Did you envision anything like what's materialized when you began?

Well, I don't think we envisioned something quite as far-reaching as it's become or as big. I mean, things have developed as time has gone on but it's made for a very interesting job.

How has the approach to presenting the Statue and Ellis Island changed during your time there?

Well, different themes have come to the surface. Like with the Statue of Liberty we realized that there was sort of a hidden theme of liberty that had not been brought out since the Park Service has operated the Statue of Liberty since the 1930s. And that was the meaning of freedom from slavery. That the people involved with creating the Statue of Liberty were all abolitionists. So that there was this story about the French being interested in a monument that would not only talk about freedom from tyranny and monarchy but also they were admiring the fact that the United States had recently freed its slaves. So it was a more widespread freedom than had originally been interpreted at the site. So we included that in the story after a lot of research to make sure this was a valid story that we could be talking about.

And then Ellis Island, we started off developing it as a historic site, to tell the story of the immigration that came through Ellis Island into the United States from 1892 to 1954. After opening, it soon became apparent that Ellis Island had become a symbol of immigration for the entire United States and that the larger story of immigration needed to be told at the site to put the Ellis Island story in the proper context of immigration history in the United States. So we have since developed new exhibits that talk about the early years of

immigration from the 1500s up to the time Ellis Island opened and then more contemporary immigration from World War II to the present and then we have a small exhibit on the history of citizenship in the United States, how that evolved over time.

So this was the new Peopling of America Center galleries that opened in 2015?

Yes, it actually opened in two stages. The first part opened in . . . I'm trying to think, it was before the hurricane [Sandy] which was sort of a big demarcation in our history. I think it was 2012 when the earlier period of immigration exhibit opened and then we had the hurricane in the end of 2012 and were recovering from that into 2013, and then we continued the work on the rest of the Peopling of America project and opened it in 2015. That's probably more information than you need. But it's been a long, long period of time working on these projects.

That's a really huge expansion of the role of the museum, to take in all these other years of immigration history.

Yes.

I understand that the community was very involved in creating these new exhibitions and I'm just curious if you can tell me a little bit about how you involved visitors and others in creating the new exhibits.

Well, we have an immigration history committee that we have worked with in all of our projects. And that was created through the Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Foundation that does our fundraising for us and is one of our oldest partners who helped us through the two restoration periods. But the immigration historians are from universities throughout the United States. And basically when we decided to do this new Peopling of America project, we all over a weekend got in a room and worked with them to come out sort of with an outline of the immigration history of the United States. And then through that started taking the various themes and working them into the exhibit. And then along the way going out to various National Park Service sites and historical sites in different places around the U.S. getting photographs. Because we have timelines. This is one of the key things that holds the whole thing together is these timelines for the different themes in the exhibits. Getting photographs, finding different significant events that occurred from the different communities because we didn't want it to just be the East Coast interpretation of immigration history but things that happened in Hawaii and Alaska and different parts of the West Coast and the Midwest and the Southwest that all went together into making what we call the Peopling of America. All the different people who came from different places and then in cases like areas in the West and Southwest, there was land where people were living and their families had been there for generations,

and then suddenly it became part of the United States. So people didn't physically move anywhere but the United States more or less came to them. So there was this bigger story of how the Peopling of America occurred, through movement, through annexing borders and various things like that. And that would also apply to Hawaii and Alaska, particularly in Hawaii. People had been there for generations and it suddenly became part of the U.S. And then there's territories. There's a little bit in the exhibits about the territories that became part of the United States, like Guam and some of the Samoan islands and Puerto Rico. It's been an interesting project and we've tried to continue to work with communities throughout the U.S. As well as, because we have so many people coming to the museum from all over the U.S. as well as from other countries, we constantly get comments about different historical facts or dates or whatever and if we've made mistakes, we correct those. But it's interesting, people coming here and seeing their history at this place where so many people for so long just associated Ellis Island with the mass immigration that took place in the early 20th century. But realizing now that you've got the whole history here from all these different communities.

I've read that more visitors pass through Ellis Island National Museum of immigration than during the peak years when immigrants were processed there. Is that true?

Well, probably. Because I think the busiest day in Ellis Island history was in the early 20th century and it was between 11,000 and 12,000 immigrants. On a busy day, we could have up to 20,000 people here. During the winter it's very quiet but during the summer we have a huge number of people going through. And part of that is because Ellis Island is part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument. So you have these two really significant monuments on two islands next to each other and one boat service that takes people to both islands. So both islands get a huge number of visitors a year.

What do you think makes Ellis Island so fascinating to people?

Well if you think about your family history, everybody at least in the United States is from somewhere else. So I think more and more people want to know if not their specific family history, just sort of what this whole migration sensibility is about. And people forget, about 50% of our visitors are from outside the U.S. All these immigrants who came to the U.S. left families behind in other countries. So we have a lot of people who come to Ellis Island from Europe, for instance, who had relatives who came through Ellis Island. It's not just people living in the United States.

And then also, there are more and more migration museums being created all over the world in different countries. So it's a hot topic, and it affects everybody. So I think everybody, no matter where you live, knows someone who left and went somewhere else or who came from somewhere else. And there's just millions of stories that are being told in our museum and others.

And we've worked with a variety of other migration museums in other countries to talk about these various stories. And we're part of the International Sites of Conscience Coalition. And there's a number of immigration sites that are members of that group. So right now we're working with them to try and develop sort of an international migration museum working group where we can share programs, stories, collections, etc.

Did anyone from your family immigrate through Ellis Island?

No, my family actually came to the United States much earlier. But I do have a number of people on my staff whose parents or grandparents came through.

The institutions you oversee are so fundamental to the identity of this country. Is that something that looms over you when you're making programming decisions?

Yeah, I would have to say it looms over us every day. When you look out your office window and you see the Statue of Liberty, there's no way you can forget these monumental facts. And it has a lot to do with the kinds of programs we try and develop.

Immigration is controversial, especially maybe in this political moment. What is the role of the Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration when it comes to contemporary debates about immigration?

Well, what we try and do is provide some historical context. People make these grand pronouncements about immigration that happened in the 19th century and early 20th century. And what we try and do is connect what people are saying with what actually happened, because it's usually not the same. And then at the same time, in our newer exhibit where we talk about contemporary immigration, we work with the History Channel. We have a whole number of videos that are sort of like video oral histories of people talking about their own personal immigration experience. And in one section, we have videos that express different points of view about specific topics. Like we have two young women talking about illegal immigration. They're both immigrants. One came into the country legally and is now a judge and so, of course, she's very pro-legal immigration. The other woman is an illegal immigrant and talking about really wanting to go to college but she can't go because she doesn't have a social security number. So we've tried to create opposing points of view on certain key topics without saying what's right and what's wrong. Just this is how people feel, these are people's situations.

And then we have a number of videos that's called Towns Across America. And it shows different towns in the U.S. Many of them you would not think of as immigration towns, like in Georgia and the Midwest. Well, actually one of

them is Queens, which is a very mixed city in terms of ethnic groups. They're short videos but it's the people of the town talking about the groups that have come to their towns and how they've changed. And in most cases, it's for the better. One is from a town that had a meatpacking company move in and they hired primarily Hispanic workers and how that changed the makeup of the town. And now there are Mexican restaurants in the town and the grocery store sells [a] different type of produce because there's a different clientele there. And then there's another town in California that is inhabited by a lot of upper-class Chinese immigrants. And the video takes place in the hair salon where the women are getting their hair done and talking about their kids that don't want to take Chinese language lessons and they don't want to learn Tai Chi. And there's a short segment of a boy who comes in; his parents are Chinese immigrants. He talks about how he didn't want to do these things. He just wants to play with his friends and blah blah blah. So it's sort of funny. But it's trying to, I guess, show the human side of immigration. We're not showing all the statistics and the facts in black and white but showing it through the people who actually have come here and their personal experiences.

A related question, maybe on a more global scale. We're in the middle of a refugee crisis. There are more displaced people in the world now than there have ever been. Is there anything that immigration museums can do to address this crisis?

Well, going back to what I said earlier, the best thing that museums can do is to show what the real situation is because many times I would say people exaggerate the facts. And sometimes they make things . . . when presenting the negative side of the whole refugee movement or whatever. I think it helps to show the human side, to show individuals, to get people to tell their stories and to just get it out there. I mean it's not a pretty picture, what's going on right now in Europe. You can't make it sound more positive, but I think you can have refugees tell their own story and then, as a backdrop, explain how the whole refugee system works with UNHCR. How refugee camps are set up. We have done some exhibits in the past before all this refugee crisis happened. But we've worked with UNHCR, the UN High Commissioner [for] Refugees, who are the ones who go around the world setting up the refugee camps. And they're doing an amazing job. But one of the things we've tried to do is explain what *is* a refugee. Since the 1950s, there's an actual legal definition of refugee that was created shortly after the United Nations was created and so when you talk about Ellis Island immigrants, they may have been refugees by this definition back in the early 20th century, but legally they weren't refugees because that sort of thing didn't exist at the time. But then, talk about the fact that there's a lot of famous people who've been refugees. Like Albert Einstein. And there's various graphics that the UNHCR, they've done these great posters with LEGO characters where they say "Find the refugee in this group," and they all look exactly alike. So I think part of the attempt is to try and humanize refugees and not to say they're these alien people that are coming in to

destroy your country. But to a certain extent, we all come from immigrants. Refugees have been around a long time and they deserve our support.

It's a tough subject and I think there's a lot more going on Europe than there is in the United States. In my association with ICOM, one of the ICOM committees—it's the international committee of city museums—and their acronym is CAMOC [The International Committee for the Collections and Activities of Museums of Cities]. They've taken on this issue of migration because a lot of city museums are dealing with that. And they've had a number of migration museum workshops in the last few years and their annual meetings have been focused to a certain extent on the refugee situation in Europe. And they're having a meeting this fall in Mexico City and doing another one of their migration museum workshops. So I think they're trying to bring museums together. Part of it's getting everyone to talk to each other and talk about the different programs we're all doing and how each of us are dealing with it. Because each of us have different aspects to deal with. And certain things work, certain things don't work. But the more you communicate with other museums, I think the better it is. And you can try and come up with resources that you can share with each other.

I'd like to turn now to the Statue of Liberty. I understand there's a lot more security now than there ever was before September 11, 2001. How has that affected the experience for visitors?

Well, right now you have to get tickets to go into the monument. And because the monument can only hold so many people at a time and that's based on the fire codes, which we are now rigorously enforcing. After 9/11, a lot of things changed. And we had to look at how many people we could safely have in the monument at one time and be able to evacuate within a reasonable amount of time. And that was not something we had done before. We just let everybody come in. So there was a solid line in and a solid line out. Now we screen people before they get on the boat and that's to see if people have any weapons or illicit substances. And then when they get to the Statue of Liberty, if they have tickets to go into the pedestal or up to the crown, they have to go through another layer of security screening. And the problem for the visitors is there's probably only about 10% of the visitors are allowed in the monument on a given day, and that's because of the ticketing system. I will say, those people who have tickets and go up to the crown or the top of the pedestal have a much better experience than they used to, because they're provided with a guided tour by the park ranger up to the crown. They're given a lot more information and history about the Statue of Liberty and how it was created. But they're limited. There's only so many people who can get these tickets. So as a result, we're in the process of designing and building a museum building that will go in at the opposite side of the island from the Statue of Liberty. That museum will tell the story that's now being told on a limited basis in the monument through exhibits and through staff. So that everyone will have access to this museum. And they'll be able to find out about the history and the construction of the statue. There

will be a film experience. We're trying to duplicate the experience you have going up in the statue. But as I said, that will be available to everybody and that I think will improve the experience dramatically. And that museum should be open in the spring of 2019.

Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty have been through a lot in your time there. 9/11, you mentioned Hurricane Sandy. What would you say has been the biggest challenge in your work over the years?

I'd say one of the biggest challenges was right at the very beginning. The restoration of the Statue but really creating the Ellis Island Museum. When I first got here, Ellis Island was a ruin. The building had not been used since it was closed in 1954. Water had been allowed to get in. It was just a mess. I can remember looking around and people saying there's not enough money in the world to restore this building. It did take a number of years; it took longer than we all expected. It took about five years to rehabilitate the building. But it happened and the exhibits went in and I think that they've stood the test of time. I think it was an amazing experience. But I think that was probably the biggest challenge was taking a building that was almost a ruin and turning it into a contemporary museum. It's like a fortress, the building. It's so well constructed and we tried to restore it as closely as we could to the original building construction using a lot of the original materials or similar materials. And it worked, but it was a struggle.

Were there artifacts left in the building?

Oh, yeah. There were. We have a whole collection; we call it our Field Collection. Because it was a federal government operation, the federal agency GSA [General Services Administration] was in charge of all the . . . I mean, there were lots of offices, desks, filing cabinets. Then there were beds, you know, that type of thing. People always ask us if immigrants left things, like luggage and all that, and that's not the case. But it was more of the federal government operations that took place there that were left.

And just before I got here, the Park Service had a contract with the New York University Museum Studies program and had the students go through. They literally went through all of the buildings, did an inventory of the types of furniture and artifacts that were left there, and we used this inventory to select a sample of all the things we would put in the museum collection. Because there was no way we could put everything in the museum collection. We would have had to take up half the island. And a lot of it was, as I said, government furniture. So we have this collection of things and we have a lot of photographs. Because a variety of photographers came over to the island even though it was closed and took photographs. And we also did a lot of photography of the restoration as it was in process. So we have a furniture collection, we have a photography collection. And then we also went through and collected all the paper that was left in drawers, or stuck behind drawers, or on the ground or whatever and put together an archival collection of these

papers. So we have a record of the things that were left here when Ellis Island closed.

What's the most gratifying part of your job?

I think the most gratifying part of my job is seeing how people enjoy the museum. It's really gratifying just to walk through the museum on a daily basis and have so many people coming in and people going through the exhibits and obviously really focusing on the information and learning about immigration. And everywhere I go, people tell me how much they enjoy the museum. But just the day to day, watching people experience the exhibits and the programs is very gratifying.

Well, thank you so much for talking with me.

Well, thank you for this opportunity.

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