S

cated at a round table, “Su-
san” watches while her two
children, ages six and twelve,
work together to connect the
wires to the battery pack and
the bot. As the connection is
made and the bot springs to life,
the museum educator wraps up
the session, asking about the
circuitry vocabulary learned
that day. The kids and their
mom excitedly yell out words, and the chil-
dren leave the session on a high note from
the activity they all shared. Back at the table,
Susan takes off her gray sweatshirt, reveal-
ing her orange Department of Corrections
shirt beneath and prepares to head back to
the cell area. This museum experience didn’t
take place in a classroom or at a museum—
it was part of the visitation program in a lo-
cal jail. And it plays an important part in
creating emotional connections for the large
female prison population in Tulsa and their
children in the foster care system.

Since opening our first museum
with walls in May 2013—in a former
12,000-square-foot city recreation center—
Tulsa Children’s Museum Discovery Lab has
delivered outreach programming to more
than 30,000 children and families each
year. But our approach to programming has
shifted. Still committed to identifying and
meeting a broad range of community needs,
our ideal program partnership model is one
in which the partner’s goals and missions
not only align with our own but actively ad-

The Outreach Starting Point

A 2007 museum-conducted needs as-
seessment of low-income families in the Tulsa
area revealed that local families needed more
opportunities to breach the deficit in access
to informal learning experiences. Beyond
the typical barriers of economics and trans-
portation, a more significant one was fear of
the unknown or perceiving museums as “not
for them.”

After surveying a number of museum
outreach programs, in 2013 Discovery Lab
launched Accessible Discovery, a three-
pronged school-based program engaging an
entire school’s student population in a field
trip to the museum, a museum class, and an
outreach class back at the school. Through
this program, we have been able to serve
five to six local elementary schools annually,
reaching around 5,000 students each year.

However, we wanted to find ways to
connect with families more directly. It was
difficult to track impact and reach families
not already seeking enrichment experiences
for their children. Local schools were happy
to give out guest passes and memberships,
but the museum found that families did
not redeem passes for reasons ranging from
transportation to unfamiliarity with the
children’s museum—or any museum, for
that matter.

In 2015, museum leaders met with orga-
nizations serving low-income populations.
We formed a number of partnerships with
organizations such as Domestic Violence
Intervention Services, Parent Child Center
of Tulsa, Department of Human Services,
New Hope Oklahoma, Housing Authority
of Tulsa, and Sooner Start. The museum
provided content for their programs. Many
of these programs, some scheduled, some
drop-in, were—and still are—successful.
They were well-reviewed and well-attended.
But we still wanted to pursue deeper con-
nections with outreach audiences, both to
improve the quality of our pro-
gramming and to better gauge programmatic impact.

During an exploratory
meeting in 2016, a longtime
funder connected us with a
forward-thinking organization
interested in a new approach
to accessibility: the Women in
Recovery (WIR) Program at
Family & Children's Services of
Tulsa (FCS). WIR was the first
organization that sought our assistance in helping their
clients achieve a better life. WIR valued the
museum’s educational programming not just
for its content, but as a connector for their
client families—a much deeper interest than
distributing guest passes. WIR had been in
existence for six years when Discovery Lab
joined as a partner, but this partnership be-
came the model to which future partner-
ships aspire.

Women in Recovery

The Family & Children’s Services
Women in Recovery (WIR) program is an
intensive outpatient alternative for eligible
women facing long sentences for non-vio-

tent alcohol and drug-related offenses. In
partnership with the George Kaiser Family
Foundation, the organization has worked
closely with the criminal justice system and
various community partners for more than
ten years. Program participants receive su-
pervision, substance abuse and mental health
treatment, education, workforce readiness
training, and family reunification services.
The WIR office contains a classroom and
counseling facility where WIR holds volun-
tary monthly meetings for women who have
graduated from the program, some living in
transitional living centers, and some now on
their own. The museum provides hands-on
STEM and health-and-wellness program-
ing at these meetings, which typically in-

volve fifty to sixty attendees, including both
mothers and their children, ranging in age
from birth to teens. These meetings provide
mothers with a support system, and in many
cases, a means to reconnect with their chil-
dren as some are in the delicate reunification
process.

During the meetings, museum educa-

On the model to which future partners aspire.
tors are flexible, adapting the curriculum on the fly depending on the age and number of attendees. One month they may make “jiggle-bots” together and another month build canister rockets. Every activity sparks curiosity in the children, paving the way for increased connections within families and modeling meaningful play behaviors. Kids love these fun activities, but more importantly for WIR, their enthusiasm spurs attendance for the mothers. These lively Discovery Lab meetings facilitate relationship-building not only with the children and their mothers, but among the other mothers as well, making their group more cohesive as they lean on each other to stay the course.

Twice each year, we host a program alumnae meeting at the museum. Participants have an opportunity to connect with their children, but in a new environment. Most of the mothers have never been to a children’s museum, but many of the children have attended on school field trips. As the mothers continue to attend alumnae meetings and become more comfortable with the museum, they can receive memberships and scholarship spots for their children in summer or spring break museum camps.

Children whose mothers are incarcerated have usually experienced significant trauma in their lives. Emotions run high on both sides during these visits. Some children arrive with frightening ideas about what their mother’s life is like in the detention center, even imagining them chained to a wall with only food and water. There is a lot to overcome in a short period of time, and dwelling on a child’s worries and fears can make the visitation detrimental rather than an opportunity to connect with their mother. Based on the WIR program’s success at strengthening the connections between mothers and their children, staff at both FCS and the museum theorized a similar co-learning experience could help facilitate connecting behaviors in the PIJ program as well. And some of the PIJ women would eventually feed into the WIR program, so the museum could start improving those relationships earlier in the continuum of care.

But running a program inside a prison was a little more involved than conducting one at a social services office. There was a poor rate of return on guest passes. When we asked why, caregivers said they were unaware of the location and hours of operation of Discovery Lab. As a result, staff have changed their approach to communicating with caregivers, making sure to provide all relevant information and answer any questions. As a result, guest pass utilization has increased from zero to 12 percent. Additional feedback from PIJ caregivers indicated that the children enjoyed “Discovery Lab days” and looked forward to visitation more on the days they knew there would be an activity.

The mothers in the WIR focus group reported that the Discovery Lab programming built excitement among their children doing that day. In addition, caregivers are given free guest passes to the museum and gas cards to encourage them to bring the kids there.

Learning from Mothers and Caregivers

In 2019, WIR alumni and PIJ caregivers took part in focus groups to help determine the strengths and opportunities of the two programs. Among PIJ caregivers, there was a poor rate of return on guest passes. When we asked why, caregivers said they were unaware of the location and hours of operation of Discovery Lab. As a result, staff have changed their approach to communicating with caregivers, making sure to provide all relevant information and answer any questions. As a result, guest pass utilization has increased from zero to 12 percent. Additional feedback from PIJ caregivers indicated that the children enjoyed “Discovery Lab days” and looked forward to visitation more on the days they knew there would be an activity.

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to attend alumnae meetings. They noted the connections their children made with other children, and the ones they made with fellow WIR alumnae, as one of the most beneficial outcomes. Further, many children showed a greater interest in STEM learning as a result of the programming and enjoyed the opportunity to attend museum camps during school breaks. Mothers were learning with their children and feeling more comfortable talking about STEM and participating in Discovery Lab activities, which led to a greater use of the gift memberships.

Creating a Model for Greater Impact

After our experiences with WIR and PIJ, we look at organizational partnerships differently. The most powerful program model starts by going to where the clients are—in this case, social services sites or jails—to involve them in co-learning with their children.

The goal of each of our partnerships is a continuum of engagement; we maintain levels of outreach, based on need, that range from distributing guest passes and memberships to full programmatic partnerships. The pacing and the nature of that engagement changes to match the program. We have found that key elements for success are 1) the partner organization’s client group, such as mothers in recovery, identifies as a peer group, 2) they experience the museum programming through this peer group, and 3) the partner organization tracks attendance, engagement, and results. Through this feedback loop, we are able to improve both content and delivery of our programs, paving the way to reach other need-specific audiences.

Scaling for the Future

Discovery Lab is embarking on a new expansion, and in the next eighteen months, the museum’s facility will more than triple our current size. Scaling the Accessible Discovery program to continue to meet community needs has begun in earnest. A capital campaign donor has made an additional gift of $500,000 to start this process while retaining the spirit of the current program.

Expanding on our experiences with both WIR and DIJ, the museum is currently planning programming at Kate Barnard, a prison facility in Oklahoma City, partnering with New Hope Oklahoma to deliver hands-on co-learning experiences during children’s visitation time with their mothers. New Hope focuses on helping to break the cycle of incarceration by focusing on the social, emotional, and educational well-being of the children of incarcerated parents. The museum is also developing a program that will work with support groups for foster parents reinforcing the connection of the foster children with their foster families, and with their biological parent(s) in the case of reunification. The model for all new partnership programming involves identifying shared objectives and working with established peer groups to develop a programming plan—with the end goal of converting program participants to museum-goers through a progression of impact.

Anne Mannell is the director of organizational development and a founding board member of Tulsa Children’s Museum Discovery Lab.

The Responsive Children’s Museum

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