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CHAPTER 4

A City Too Busy to Reflect? Public History, Controversy, and Civic Engagement

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In 1981, Gary Trudeau captured an America (and a military) seeking to escape the past when he penned character Mike Doonesbury watching the news on television. An army general being interviewed declared, "It's time we moved forward and finally put the conflict in Southeast Asia behind us!"

The reporter responded, "Excuse me, General, but aside from your personal convenience, why would you have people 'put behind them' precisely those things which should never be forgotten?" The reporter prodded, "Tell me, General, is it all right for the Japanese to be 'sick and tired of Pearl Harbor'? Should the Germans ever be allowed to 'put the Holocaust behind them'?"

"Yes," the general explained, "they're allies."

"And the Nuremberg trials?" the reporter posed.

"Wallowing in World War II," the general retorted (Trudeau, 1981).

While Trudeau depicted a military tired of answering for transgressions in Vietnam, his cartoon also reflected a larger, public reluctance to engage difficult historical or policy-related issues. Similarly, many students view discussion of controversial topics as antithetical to the goal of establishing "community." Such discussions, the reasoning goes, provoke animosity, reintroduce old hurts, or sometimes erect new barriers. Rather, many students, like Trudeau's general, would prefer to "move on." Yet communities benefit not only from citizens who are open to discussing and working through various contentious public issues and past events,

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but also from members who are willing to facilitate such exchange responsibly, encouraging mutual respect and understanding between community members. As historian Patricia Mooney-Melvin (1999) asserts:

> Students' lack of historical knowledge about the past results in an inability to see themselves, their families, and their communities as part of the larger process of American history. If students fail to see their own histories as important, they do not believe that they can have an impact on their environments. (p. 17)

Adopting this framework, I decided to add to Kennesaw State University's introductory public history course a component that would move beyond the usual readings-based discussion of how professionals tackled sensitive issues. I devised a project that would walk students through ways to facilitate such dialogue with the public. In addition to giving the students usable professional skills, I sought to promote civic engagement, to support students in proactively taking these lessons out into their noncollege worlds. In our fall 2001 class, I charged students with designing an exhibit that would encourage our northwest Georgia community to explore its history of race relations and the subculture surrounding lynching—an exhibit that would help build community by facilitating the *public's* exploration of our nation's (and region's) violent past.

The project was informed by principles and practices espoused by the Keeping and Creating Communities (KCAC) project, specifically that collaboration is essential to keeping and creating communities; that there is value in recovering and critiquing community texts; and that shared actions contribute to the formation of community cultures. The project also developed out of my conviction that historians (public or academic) should advance *public* discussion about the state of their community, nation, or world. I wanted our students not only to be willing participants in such community formation, but also to be willing to lead the charge.

Public history is, generally speaking, history geared toward nonacademic audiences. It includes history as interpreted through museums or exhibitions, along with archival management and historic preservation. It involves the study of public commemoration such as historical markers, as well as nontraditional forms of public interpretation of historical events such as plays or walking tours (Cole, 1994). Public-history classes and programs train students to pursue these fields professionally and to view the public-historical landscape critically, looking for larger meanings, political uses of history, the development of collective memory, and equitable representation. In my classroom, for example, and following historian

James Loewen's (1999) model, we asked, "Whose history makes it onto our state historical markers?"

The introduction to public-history class is required for those students pursuing the public-history undergraduate certificate at Kennesaw State and is an elective for history majors and minors. Otherwise, the class is open to all students who have completed the general education requirement, U.S. history since 1890. The class reflects the school's population, which is predominantly White, suburban, and lower-middle to middle income. These residents of an area long stereotyped as a destination for 1970s "White flight" proved to be an interesting population with whom to try out community-based examination of sensitive issues by using the KCAC teaching model. Additionally, through their prior formal and informal education experiences, many of the students seemed to have been acculturated to avoid social controversy or to negotiate through it with a "southern" brand of politeness. But I envisioned using public history as a way to encourage and facilitate more direct engagement with social issues.

Controversy is a topic examined in most public-history programs. Recall the arguments over the proposed *Enola Gay* exhibit at the National Air and Space Museum, an exhibit that eventually—after pressure from veterans' groups, political organizations, and consequently the funding agencies—was so modified from its original design that the original framework was canned (Wallace, 1996a; Miller, 1995). As recently as April 2003, protests erupted over the exhibition *Mirroring Evil* at the Jewish Museum (New York), which included 13 artists' work based on the Holocaust. Indeed, history is personal; it is part of how we view *ourselves*. Hence, the ability to confront and work through sensitive issues with multiple interest groups is relevant to all our students. To address two key elements—reflecting on other agencies' handling of controversy and proactively examining a sensitive issue—I developed a multidimensional course segment grounded in KCAC learning strategies that any teacher can adapt to different topics or student populations.

This Community and Controversy component was one of the last I scheduled us to cover. The students needed grounding in basic public history concepts (the functions of public history, memory, exhibit design and critique, and so on) before they would fully understand why some topics might be controversial. They needed to be comfortable with thinking about public history and the variety of approaches that different groups, regions, and even countries have taken to interpreting the past. Likewise, they needed exposure to the politics of public history, the lack of curatorial freedom, and the power of funding bodies.

My students' aversion to introducing controversial topics within t classroom (much less the larger community) was evident early in t course, making this segment all the more important. This hesitancy, in pa was caused by their lack of experience with discussion. In this class, m sessions focused on discussing group projects or reflecting on the previc class's field trip. Because most other history classes in the college us lecture, the students needed time to get acclimated to the seminar meth It seemed, however, that the students did not feel comfortable disagre ing with one another. I observed eye-rolls by some students when oth offered opinions contrary to their own, but rarely a verbal challen Outside class, students were more willing to discuss contrary opinions w me, but when asked why they didn't bring up those points in class, so expressed reluctance to cause ill feelings.

When I realized that students were reluctant to offer challenging guments, we collectively examined the idea of "discussion" and the ide ogy behind the "seminar method" of teaching. The students concurred t this was a useful form of learning and knowledge development, but th still didn't disagree. In fact, most wrote strong papers about such topics the mythologizing of the Old South or the narrow portrayal of wome lives in a particular local exhibit. But they balked at "live" discussion o contentious issues. This didn't bode well for the Community and Contr versy segment of the course.

CONTROVERSY BEGINS AT HOME

The mounting of *Without Sanctuary*, a collection of lynching photograp assembled by Atlantan James Allen, presented a unique opportunity f my Community and Controversy segment. By engaging with prima materials used for the exhibit—available through *journalE*, an onli multimedia journal (www.journale.com/withoutsanctuary)—and pla ning their own exhibit of the lynching images, students would colle tively pursue the meaning of the events and materials *themselves* wh at the same time considering how to facilitate this discussion with the larg community. The images of lynching—vigilante justice visited most oft upon Black males, but also on Jews, Catholics, women, and other groups are disturbing enough, but Allen's collection impresses upon viewers t larger culture surrounding such expressions of power and hatred. Aft all, many of Allen's images are *postcards*—images sent to friends and rel tives, or tacked on a wall to fondly recall a particular place or eve Worse, many of the images suggest a carnival atmosphere. Crowds gath

Families are present. Young girls are seen posing next to a hanging. The questions such images raise are innumerable. They sadden, shock, and repulse.

The contextual material was intellectually accessible to my students, an element I actively sought for a case study. I've found that presenting students with a combination of new content *and* new methodology is troublesome. If students are comfortable with particular historical content, they can concentrate on new methodology, and vice versa. In this case, our history students were already familiar with the history of race relations in the South, lynching, Jim Crowism, and their legacy. Through conversations, I found out that most students were familiar with Atlanta's history of image-consciousness and, too, they were aware of just how embedded issues of race remain in southern culture. Since we had a familiar content area, we could focus more fully on methods for developing community dialogue.

GETTING STARTED

Throughout the first 8 to 10 weeks of our introductory class, students explored approaches to bringing history to the public. On in-class field trips, we did not normally follow the standard tourist tour, but visited with curators, collectors, association directors, archivists, and the like, who discussed various hurdles they confronted and even their own impression of the field's mission. We checked out the grassroots preservation efforts at Prater's Mill in Varnell, Georgia; discussed the trials of starting and operating a historical society with the director of Roswell's historical association; and chatted with the director of Sloss Furnaces (in Birmingham, Alabama) about innovative labor education programs, as well as the challenges of raising funds to stabilize the national landmark. In out-of-class assignments, students visited sites "as tourists"—viewing the site as would any other visitor. They followed up by reflecting on these sites in writing and often discussing them in class. By the time we were scheduled to start Community and Controversy, the students had completed two exhibit reviews, gone on a variety of field trips, and read a number of scholarly and popular pieces critiquing exhibits, memorials, oral history projects, and the like. Additionally, they'd already been through two in-class workshops designing their own "exhibits" on different topics, so they were comfortable with being given a task, brainstorming solutions, developing consensus, and summarizing their results. In one in-class assignment, for example, the group was charged with proposing two designs for a public exhibit examining the history of Kennesaw State University since the school's

founding in 1963, and explaining each design. Thus, with some practice at developing their own ideas and working as a public-history team, they were ready to pursue more complex issues.

The first component of the Community and Controversy segment was the reading of specific case studies on how other agencies had handled curating exhibits on controversial material. We read and discussed historian Mike Wallace's (1996a) essay "The Battle of the *Enola Gay*," a critical assessment of the National Air and Space Museum's unintended participation in the 1990s culture wars; Wallace's (1996b) article "Disney's America," which summarizes the squall the Walt Disney Company created when it announced its intention to open a new theme park tracing America's history; historian Debra Michals's (2001) essay "Did the Women's Museum Wimp Out?" a scathing critique of the whitewashing of "sensitive" material through pressure applied by corporate sponsors; and Jeffrey Gettleman's (2000) recent newspaper article on the protests that erupted after the placement of a Nathan Bedford Forrest monument in a predominantly African American neighborhood in Selma, Alabama. In the following class, I presented our project: to design an exhibit plan based on James Allen's lynching photograph and postcard collection.

PLANNING OUR EXHIBIT

To the class, I introduced the collection and pointed out that it had already been publicly exhibited in New York and Pittsburgh. Now Allen wanted to bring it home—to Atlanta. I explained that mounting such a project might sound easy, but the proposal had already generated much discussion, discussion that we were going to visit and engage in ourselves. We sought to create a dialogue with the community about our city's and region's past history of racial violence and, in turn, to confront its legacy. By hashing out the meaning of this difficult material as a group (and presumably with the public), we would be forging new communities of understanding. We'd be collectively finding meaning in the past. Indeed, before class had begun for the semester, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (AJC) had framed the debate for metro Atlantans. An August 2001 article outlined "the squabble" mounting over James Allen's and John Littlefield's proposed exhibit (Fox, 2001b). Rick Beard, then director of the Atlanta History Center, signaled his reluctance when he suggested that such an exhibit tour through several *other* cities before coming to Atlanta. The *AJC* went on to quote Beard's explanation that "put bluntly, the 'city too busy to hate' is often also the city too busy to think deeply about the painful

aspects of its past until somebody 'foreign' tells them it is OK and perhaps even important to do so" (Fox, 2001a, p. E1).

Because *journalE* had curated a stripped-down, Web-based exhibit of the material, my class had a collection to work with. We ignored the interpretive material that supplemented the online collection and focused on the primary material. (Later we discussed how we could use that secondary material to enhance the public's understanding). And we discussed the exhibit plans as if we were, in reality, planning for an actual exhibit. Because the course is not designed to provide rigorous training for future museologists, we focused on the *planning process* of determining the interpretive approach, media mix, and public-forum elements.

After warning students about the harrowing nature of the images, I took them through the collection online. We looked at approximately 35 images and read where the lynching had taken place, any background the collector knew about the crime at hand, and what (if any) text had been added to the image or postcard. Except for the occasional "What does that say?" we didn't talk while viewing the material for the first time. We then held a brief, open discussion that mostly consisted of particular things that stood out to the students. Students commented on gender and regional representation, the nature of the text on the postcards, the different forms lynching took, and the like. After this initial discussion, we went through the material again.

We considered whether we, in our newly formed (if virtual) agency, were really willing to host such an exhibit. What could be gained? Like many Atlantans, some of my students were reluctant to commit themselves to launching such an exhibit; they were afraid that the city wasn't ready to confront its past. We went on to discuss what gave people that impression, and the students struggled to articulate specific examples. Some cited the continued use of Confederate symbols throughout the region while others offered personal anecdotes of some locals' use of violence as a scare tactic. One student, for example, told of a neighbor standing in his yard with a gun when an African American couple moved into the neighborhood. In contrast, those students arguing for the exhibit were so moved by this new material (like most who see Allen's photographs), and how it surpassed the now-tired textbook depictions of the Jim Crow South, that they felt others would be intellectually challenged by it, that it was a "public service" to bring the exhibit to fruition.

In a significant act, Emory University (the institution that was temporarily holding the collection) and the Atlanta History Center held two public forums to gauge opinion about mounting such an exhibit—inviting the community directly into the discussion (Fox, 2000a, p. 1F; Fox, 2000b, p. 1D). The sessions were not just well attended, but full in a number of ways. The forums indicated just how important the regional population considered the healing and community-building that could be possible through such public exhibits. At the same time, Emory and the Atlanta History Center sent the message that they viewed themselves as members of the community, participants in our region's cultural development, and not "ivory tower" establishments set to dictate history to the less well informed. We read the newspaper reports, and they rendered clear just how important the discussion of our collective past was for many people. Seeing this public record made the students—at least initially—more comfortable mounting the controversial material.

Back at our virtual exhibit, we needed to develop a mission statement. This tends to be a cumbersome idea, so we approached it by developing, first, a list of questions we wanted answered by the exhibit. Questions included, Who did these things? Who were the bystanders? Why was Allen collecting such things? What were his goals? Why wasn't the established legal system in play? Who were the victims? What was the socioeconomic structure of the area in which this had occurred? Why is the South overrepresented? These and other questions went toward the task of developing our tentative themes:

1. What is lynching?
2. Who were the victims?
3. Who were the perpetrators?
4. What was the economic and cultural context for the events?
5. What was the subculture surrounding lynching?

We then sought to firmly articulate our mission: to educate the public about violence, lynching, and racial and ethnic tensions since the 1880s and to provoke a response so as to create greater understanding between people of different races and ethnicities. We proceeded to discuss what general spatial design would support these themes. We also started thinking about *how* to interpret the material or answer the questions they posed: Would it be a stripped-down exhibit with larger-than-life copies of the images? Would there be a tape-recorder tour? Would there be background information on lynching, violence, and the like?

I followed with asking which of the ideas presented or talked about the students had liked. One student had mentioned a depiction of a slave ship that had been installed at the *Africa: One Continent, Many Worlds* exhibition at Fernbank Museum of Natural History here in Atlanta. The visitor walked through a passage with lighting that gave the effect that one was in the hold of a moving ship. At the same time, sounds of Africans (presumably in the hold with you, stolen, sick, confused, and angry) were

piped in from all directions. The students latched on to this immersion, "experiential" element immediately. How to pull it off? They noted that some of the most awe-inspiring of Allen's photos were those of large crowds viewing a lynching, so they decided to enlarge crowd photographs to life size, and wallpaper a small room with them, as if the crowds were surrounding whoever was in the room. Then they'd install a tree in one end of the room, as if it was really growing there, roots protruding through the floor and canopy going through the ceiling. The tree would have a noose on it. Then they'd introduce the stereo sound element, not simply with the sounds of a crowd, but audio that indicated the carnival atmosphere, including laughter, jeering, and children's voices. Within the room, they'd provide simple bench seating to facilitate extended reflection for those who wished it. They had no desire to depict the death itself, but the sense of being in the large crowd, part of the atmosphere of the day. They wanted it to be "haunting." They wanted the viewers to take this experience away with them.

Planning the principal section of the exhibit was more contentious. Which photos do we use? What kind of interpretation do we add? Do we lead the viewer to a certain conclusion (making a closed-end argument as a historian does in a paper), or do we present these events from multiple angles and leave the interpretation more to the viewer? Our class was divided on these standard curatorial dilemmas, some preferring to let viewers draw their own conclusions, others insisting that the historian's role was to sift through the muck and then tell the viewer what conclusions had been drawn. After all, the latter group reasoned, the visitor doesn't have time to view all the primary material available—they depend on the museum curators to help sort out the issues.

I took the students' ideas and, before the next class, developed a first-draft exhibit layout, attempting to incorporate the elements that seemed most important to the group and to find an interpretive middle ground. Overall, the proposal adopted a minimalist framework. Four large, two-sided panels, set centrally in our exhibit space, would give general information on lynching, including numbers per year, states where they occurred, and the like. Lining the walls would be a selection of the lynching postcards, showing both sides of each. In a double-sided panel set in front of each wall, two postcards would be featured. In those cases, more information would be given on the background of the victim, the alleged crime, and any other information known about what was going on. Here, the students wanted to indicate the sheer number of deaths that had occurred in this manner by having many photographs mounted on the exterior walls. By eliminating the overt interpretive element, the intensity of the photographs and number would make the statement. At the same

time, the students recognized that viewers would want to know *why* thes events really were occurring. In that case, the featured postcards woul provide more detail, suggesting the vigilante nature of the act and reiter ating the carnival nature of the events. I mocked up the exhibit layout i PowerPoint (see Figure 4.1).

Particular questions being presented in the "real-life" debate wer also fleshed out in our alternative universe. When an Atlanta Histor Center board member was quoted in the paper as suggesting that a academic institution would be a more appropriate setting for such a exhibit, we discussed the implications of that statement. Naturally thi led to where we would install our exhibit. Just who were *our* potenti viewers? Whom did we expect to attend, and whom did we *want* to a tend? Adopting the board member's suggestion, some promoted moun ing the exhibit at an academic institution (such as Emory), which ha

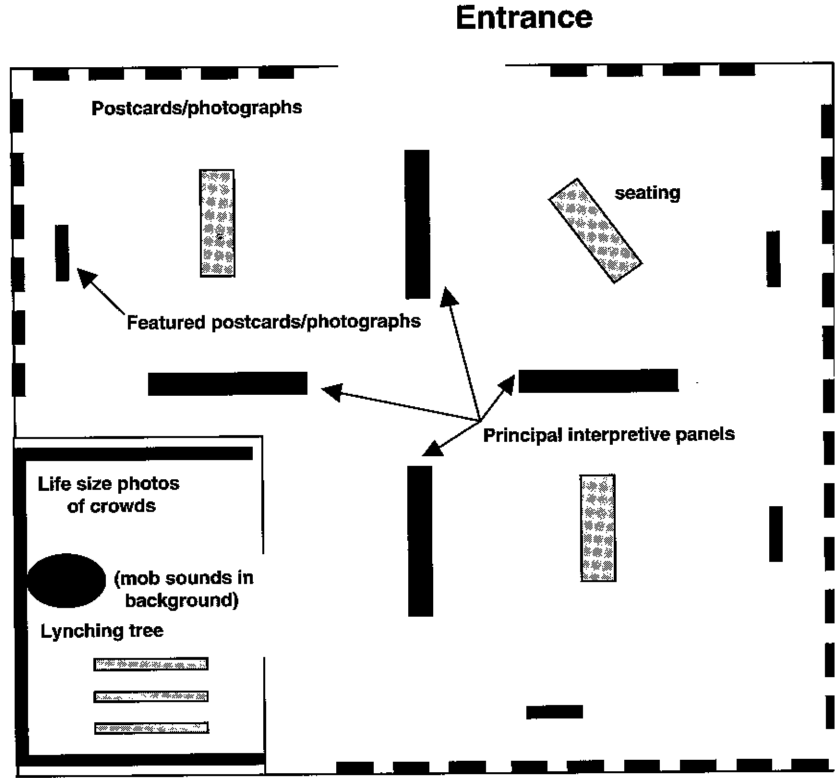

Figure 4.1. Draft design for an exhibit layout created by public history students.

the advantage of drawing on a more "astute" audience that would "understand the context" in which these events took place. Others promoted a more accessible venue, which they equated with a more accessible history. Often, as we moved on to these questions, we had to revisit our mission statement, our original goals, whom we'd sought to serve, what ideas we'd sought to advance. Our mission, which had sounded so grand—"to advance understanding between people of different races and ethnicities"—was in danger of becoming watered down in the face of fears of disorder, anger, and tension that continued to resurface.

We concluded the Community and Controversy segment by discussing what other exhibits we could mount that might assist the public in examining sensitive policy or cultural issues. One student suggested that we examine our university's growth and environmental policies since the institution's founding—issues that have produced strong reactions from students, faculty, staff, and the local community. After a few rounds on that topic, the students decided they wouldn't go through with the proposal, given the current "political climate" on campus. Asked why they thought they couldn't host a program that examined the ramifications of the university's spatial expansion into local neighborhoods or the declining green space (all topics the students had raised), some responded that the university rarely sought student input, which suggested that discussion wasn't welcome. A few thought such programming moot, as they suspected that the administration wouldn't take their views seriously. Alas, we still have some work to do to encourage student engagement—even in the most immediate community of their university—along with trust that such involvement would be welcome.

I decided that other relevant elements would be addressed in more depth in future semesters, because I had failed in this initial effort to allocate enough time to explore how we could directly interact with the public *within* the exhibit. The curator of the real exhibit, Joseph Jordan, didn't miss this feature, though. When it opened in April 2002 in a contextualized setting at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center, Atlanta's *Without Sanctuary* exhibit included a "Reflect and Respond Room" that invited the public to react to the photographs and postcards on paper or online. Likewise, *journalE*'s exhibit incorporated a forum element that invited response and reflection.

ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

In future classes, I plan to introduce an element that will explicitly walk students through the practice of polite disagreement. It was apparent that students needed to learn how to constructively disagree among themselves and to learn to use this disagreement to advance project development and learning. Such exercises will make students more comfortable with addressing sensitive issues.

Controversial topics are difficult for professional public historians to tackle, much less junior and senior undergraduates. Yet whether acting as museologists, nonprofit managers, or preservationists or simply acting out their role as citizen, students will confront volatile issues. Historic preservationists, for example, are often called upon to assist downtown development authorities or preservation commissions in negotiating the establishment of preservation ordinances. This is a mediation role in which the preservationist is expected to negotiate terms with the larger community, reconciling property owners' needs and historic preservation. Activities can quickly become battlegrounds whose outcomes range from increased tensions to lawsuits.

This civic skills–building project is also applicable beyond public history. Our communities of northwest Georgia, for example, have a range of public issues to sort through, from the acrimonious debates surrounding the building of the "Northern Arc"—a pricey second interstate bypass that would initially ease traffic congestion, but potentially pull the metropolitan area further into the hinterland—to the region's changing ethnic communities. Similarly, our citizens have ample opportunities to renegotiate understandings of our national history. As historian Mike Wallace has persistently asked, where are our exhibits analyzing the Vietnam War? Or urban renewal? (1996c, p. 120; Wallace, 1996d, p. 47). To look to for guidance, we have bold experiments examining culture and power, such as Columbia University's exhibit *Stonewall and Beyond: Lesbian and Gay Culture* and *Holding the Rock*, an innovative interpretation of the 1969 Indian seizure of Alcatraz Island, curated by the National Park Service (Strange & Loo, 2001).

While we have these innovative exhibits to look to, they are far too rare, a situation that narrows our students' knowledge base and appears to limit creative thinking. In retrospect, it is clear that the students in the class who had been exposed to more cultural programming (not just museums, but also theater, art, and even dance) and over a broader geographical area (e.g., New York City, the Southwest) brought more and varied approaches to our project. However, since I had not expected significant differences to surface, I failed to measure cultural-programming exposure before class started. Study of this variable will no doubt reveal rich data in the next round. (Correlations between race or social class and exposure to cultural resources could not be measured in this particular group, given the all-White and largely homogenous socioeconomic

makeup of the enrollment; future courses' student populations may prove more diverse in this regard, as the university's compostion is changing).

My students appeared to be fairly accepting of the idea that public exhibits could be used to foster understanding, historical context, and the building of community. Generally speaking, the history profession promotes the belief that historical understanding is *relevant* to policy making and to one's role as a citizen, so this was no surprise. The students also concurred that we could use the public forum and exhibits to nurture community. That said, members of this particular class remained uncomfortable with *risk*, brought home by the fact that we were "virtually mounting" an exhibit at the same time as the "real" exhibit was being planned. The fact that we were discussing how we would handle this exhibit proposal while similar debates were being held a few miles down the road gave the exercise more validity. Would we really mount such horrific images in a *very* public place? What would the outcome be? Would we be creating community and understanding, or breaking them down? Indeed, this reluctance to take risk was what I sought to chip away.

The students' reaction mirrors the larger public stance. As Wallace (1996b) points out, many people consider museums to be "irrelevant," simply sites of pleasant recreational activities that might generate tourism dollars (p. 167). Yet historian Howard Zinn (2001) has long promoted history as "the work of a citizen," averring that "in a world hungry for solutions, we ought to welcome the emergence of the historian . . . as an activist-scholar, who thrusts himself and his works into the crazy mechanism of history, on behalf of values in which he deeply believes. This makes of him more than a scholar; it makes him a citizen in the ancient Athenian sense of the word" (p. 203). And Wallace (1996c) recently implored museum directors and curators to "become partners with communities in effecting change" and to use museums and programs "as centers of civic debate and organization" (p. 128). Many museums have answered that call, such as in the New York Public Library's *Garbage! The History and Politics of Trash in New York City*, which not only looked at trash historically, but also included suggestions for responsibly restructuring consumption.

In this first run of the Community and Controversy project, focusing on *Without Sanctuary* was all the more challenging because the real-life debate was being played out in our own community. The students were intimately familiar with the cultural issues inherent in broaching the topic of race relations and violence. They knew the controversy. And now they'd walked through confronting it. Indeed, perhaps what will ultimately help ease students through future risk-taking forums will be the fact that Atlantans "took the risk," and it worked.

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