Doug Blecher (00:00):

Sam. Thanks so much for joining us today.

Sam Theriault (00:04):

Thank you for having me.

Doug Blecher (00:06):

I became Interested in talking with you when I read about your efforts in supporting autistic people at museums. I wanted to start off with just, um, your general interest in museums to begin with. Why did you decide to study museum education at George Washington university?

Sam Theriault (00:27):

So I guess my interest in museums started before I went to school. When I was in, I was thinking back after thinking about talking to you for the first time that I really felt excited by museums. And I realized it was on the eighth grade trip to Washington DC, that my school went on a long time ago and we were at the Air and space museum. And for some reason at that point, the Ruby slippers from the wizard of Oz were at that museum. They were renovating the American history museum and I ended up sneaking away from my class to go and see this object that I was absolutely obsessed with. And I just remember like feeling just so enthralled by that experience and just feeling awake and alive in DC and to the museums. And I really didn't know very much about museums at that point, other than just that they seemed like these really cool places, that housed objects that were related to some of my very intense and special interests.

Sam Theriault (01:37):

And I wanted to be in those environments because I felt like maybe this is a place where I could belong. So when I was in high school, I was really interested in history and anthropology and decided that I would go to school in Washington, DC for my undergraduate work. And only because I wanted to work in a museum and I was like, d.c. The Smithsonian? I need to be there. And that's, um, that's kind of what I did. I went and got a work study at the air and space museum, which I don't work at anymore. And of course, you know, I might mention a couple of museums or places I've worked before, but I don't represent them. And, you know, my views are my own, but I started working at the air and space museum despite not being a science person whatsoever.

Sam Theriault (02:30):

And I had to learn the physics of how airplanes fly so that I could explain it to other people. And I had never, ever been good at science from math or anything in that STEM realm while I was in school and just learning what the hands-on objects and holding an air foil and seeing the wind tunnel. And just the way that the science behind how an airplane flies was explained in the museum setting was fascinating to me because I was like, Oh, here I am learning science. So what is different about learning in a museum setting versus learning in an academic setting? And that pushed me to study museum education, um, for graduate work.

Doug Blecher (03:17):

And where does your passion come in supporting autistic people and their inclusion at museums?

Sam Theriault (03:24):

So I am on the autism spectrum, which I didn't learn until after I had left school when I was in my first job after graduating. And as I was sort of new to both the autism world and new to the world of working in the museum field as a professional, I just couldn't separate those two paths of learning from each other. And then I ended up, you know, I'm still grateful for this day that I was able to work on the project at the San Diego natural history museum as part of the evaluation team for that project. And, um, just seeing how that project, um, worked for the young adults on the autism spectrum and just being around them in a museum setting really helped me start to understand my autism and understand, you know, that the autism spectrum is so much broader and deeper than I understood it before I started learning about it, which, you know, I wouldn't have done if I hadn't been identified and was on the autism spectrum myself, um, which I think, you know, that kind of hits at all of our, you know, internalized and cultural ableism too, is that there are a lot of people who don't understand what autism is.

Sam Theriault (04:39):

And I think that extends to people in the museum field as well. And that's sort of something I'm realizing lately is I've been so interested in, you know, include autistic people in museums include us as staff members. And I'm realizing, you know, just in the past few weeks that when I say the word autism or autistic, my museum colleagues have a certain picture in mind of what that looks like in a person. And they don't picture somebody like me who is able to talk with them or to write about these complicated topics in our field. So I think there's some learning that we can all do there. And I've been in that position before myself. So I understand that.

Doug Blecher (05:20):

Now you mentioned a little bit, a few minutes ago about, um, learning at museums and it's interesting, cause I don't always believe that school settings are the best way to learn for a variety of reasons. Uh, and I'm wondering, do you see museums being an important part of, of the learning process for autistic people?

Sam Theriault (05:41):

I absolutely think that they are a viable alternative to learning in a school setting. You know, if you think about being in school, I, and many of my peers and close friends, um, had a hard time with certain aspects of school and it wasn't that we didn't want to learn or that we couldn't learn, um, or that we weren't interested, but that, you know, sitting in a classroom for a long period of time in an environment that isn't necessarily sensory friendly and, you know, may not be learning about something that you're interested in or the concepts might be very abstract or vague. I think that can be difficult for a lot of people. But when you go into a museum, you know, tenants of museum education involve things like object based learning. So it makes a learning very concrete. Like I was describing with learning how airplanes fly.

Sam Theriault (06:37):

Like we would have an air foil, which is a cross section of an airplane wing in our hand, so that you could use and touch and feel and see. And even then I remember learning, you know, the air going over the top of the wing and the air going underneath the wing. And finally just putting it together. One day when I was outside, I was driving in the car or maybe as a passenger and had my hand on the window. And I realized that when my hand was flat, the air just went over it. But when I curved my hands slightly like an air foil, I felt the air lifted up and move it. And finally, I understand this is how an airplane flies.

And now you see, you know, science, museums having wind tunnels and things like that that you can touch and feel.

Sam Theriault (07:20):

And if you could feel lift happen on your hand or with a toy airplane or a paper airplane, you can understand how an airplane flies, you can make that leap. Um, if you can feel it and see it and touch it, you can start to understand it. So I think that's part of, um, ways that also say people might learn better in museums. And those are ways that people who aren't autistic to can learn better at museums, it's sort of the, the universal design aspect. There, there are other conversations about informal learning that involves like project based learning. So for example, like you could imagine a community museum where, you know, a autistic student, let's say like a high schooler might come in and be at the museum instead of in a classroom. And they are helping to put an exhibition together and they do, they might have to do math while they help to like build and construct pieces of a gallery.

Sam Theriault (08:23):

They might have to learn how to understand and interpret a painting and decide which one is good to put there. Um, they might learn budgeting. Like there are all these different skills that could come out of that kind of concrete learning that you could see happen at a museum, um, that I think we could take advantage of. And that's just, you know, that's a rough example, but there are people who are thinking about that with much more expertise than I am. And I think that's something as we're thinking about how we can move our learning out of the classroom and into our communities.

Doug Blecher (08:58):

Yeah. I think the different modalities of learning is so important that the museum can bring to people. I, I often talk on the, this autism stories podcast, um, how to import it's so important about developing community. And I was wondering how do you see museums as an option to foster this community? I mean, maybe even specifically for autistic people,

Sam Theriault (09:26):

I just listened to your episode with, um, Haley Moss, I believe. And you talked about the film Crip camp on Netflix and how, how special and transformative that community instance was. And when I watched that film, I realized that it reminded me of that program in San Diego that brought all of these young adults together on the autism spectrum to work on a common goal. And we saw that over time, the young adults connected with each other and they were able to learn from each other and uplift each other. And you would see you an adult, a non-autistic adult asking one of the young adults a question and see that person pause before answering and another different younger young adult with autism would say, well, he, well, they're thinking, hold on just a second. Like let them think, and then they'll respond to you. And that person would then respond.

Sam Theriault (10:25):

So you could see that they were taking care of each other and sticking up for each other. And they were advocating for each other because there was just this default state of acceptance. They were with people who were similar, but different to them. You know, like we all say there's, if you know, one person with autism, you know, one person with autism. So I think like giving like museums have a spectral thing, which is States, right? You have this kind of third space, like a library where you have a public forum and you have rooms and places to meet and gather and projects to do, and a vested

interest in developing community so that the community will continue to support the museum and perpetuate its existence. So why not open the museum space to meet up groups for instance, or to summer camps and programs like that that are focused on people who are neurodivergent, whether that be autism, ADHD, you know, all sorts of stuff. I think we, we have the power to open doors to just give them that space for community to flourish and develop and get together and meet each other. And it sounds a little hippy dippy, but I, I really would love to see community forum like that, like it did on in that film, Crip camp and at camp Jened. Like I'd love to see more instances like that in museums.

Doug Blecher (11:57):

I think we need more hippy-dippy I agree. I've seen, I've seen more museums try to make things more sensory supportive for autistic people, which is great, but I'm also not sure there are many museums that are maybe looking beyond that. What are some additional measures that museums could take to make museum experiences better for autistic people?

Sam Theriault (12:29):

Yeah. I absolutely agree that those, those sensory experiences are important. And I just want to say that I think, you know, every, every museum with, um, autistic family or group of families and their community that they're trying to serve, you know, you have to wonder if those families feel like they can't, how am I going to say this? Um, sometimes in the museum, world visitors and community groups are hesitant to give any sort of critical feedback to a museum because they worry that if they criticize something, the museum will take that thing away. So for example, if an autism family says, Hey, I love your access hours, but I'd like to see more. I'd like to see more from the museum. They there's a worry that the museum might respond by removing those access hours. So I just want to say, that's not what we want.

Sam Theriault (13:26):

We love access hours. We want those to be there. Um, accessibility, consult consultant, um, Sina Bahram says that accessibility is making sure folks can open the door and inclusion is inviting people to come inside and enjoy what you have to offer. So to me, I see that that access sensory experiences, being able to touch things, having exhibits that are hands-on so that there's a physical and cognitive access, like you can get in the space and you can be in the environment and be relatively, okay. That is a baseline to me. And then on top of that, you can move from access to inclusion. So then you can start providing opportunities to socialize. That includes opportunities for families, for friends, for groups, for field trips, you know, summer camps and that, that kind of community building that we were talking about with reference to Crip camp.

Sam Theriault (14:27):

And then on top of that, I see, I hope for museums to make more pathways, to collaborate with autistic people and opportunities for us to contribute to museums so that we are the ones helping the museum to communicate with autistic audiences, but there is collaboration. So it's nothing about us without us. That whole idea. I read an article a couple of weeks ago in a journal, the author was Catherine Crompton and the article was called autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is it's highly effective. And it talked about how, um, uh, autistic people share information with other autistic people, as well as non-autistic people did with other non-autistic people, but in mixed groups of people who are autistic and non-autistic people, less information was shared like a bad game of telephone. So I have to wonder if museums full of non-autistic. People are trying to communicate with autistic people. You know, there's

an, there's a dearth of information that's going to happen there. So in an ideal world and in an ethical world, if we're talking about the kinds of diversity and inclusion initiatives that most museums say that they are trying to do, then that would involve hiring autistic staff members and including us in these conversations about what the museum can do for their autistic communities

Doug Blecher (16:04):

Throughout our pandemic. It seems like there's a lot more museums that have started providing virtual tours. How important do you think that has been to disabled people to experience museums? Not just now, but moving forward as our society is looking to slowly move back as much to much as possible to pre pandemic conditions.

Sam Theriault (16:32):

So I have to say I, I'm not 100% sure I'm the best person to answer this question just because I personally haven't done any virtual museum tours, which I guess sounds a little bit sacrilege. Um, but I, I just personally, like my eyes just glaze over when I try to do virtual tours and that kind of thing, I am just like personally, I'm just not super interested in them. And so I also havent been very plugged into that conversation, but there are a couple of threads that I think are important. And the first is that when it comes to any sort of programming coming from a museum or a professional organization in our field, is that whether it's visitor focused or professional focused, if you are creating virtual programming, you must build accessibility components into it. From the beginning. If you are leading a professional development webinar, you need to have captioning live captioning.

Sam Theriault (17:33):

You need to have a sign interpreter, you know, this kind of different stuff here that you maybe don't think about in your daily tours and programming, where there are other accessibility devices that are at your fingertips at the museum, or you might have a specific sign tour, you know, once or twice a week. Um, and that kind of thing. But I have seen, um, a fair amount of professional organizations in particular that are not thinking about accessibility when it comes to their online engagement. And that is frustrating to me because I feel like our professional organizations should be setting an example for their museums. That's, that's a whole rant that I have. But again, I, I think that there are other people in our field who can speak on that a little bit more than I can't, who are more effected by those situations. And I will say, um, I was talking with my partner the other day because I noticed I was kind of peeking over his phone.

Sam Theriault (18:31):

And I noticed this, that he was looking through some gallery tour. I think it was national gallery on Instagram and on Instagram stories, they were having a little virtual tour with extra information written on it and that kind of stuff. And I was like, what are you doing? What are you looking at? He's like, Oh, I'm doing this museum tour. And I was like, Oh, you didn't think to talk about this with me, like not share your thoughts on it. And he was just like, well, if, if they did it in this style and actually gave this kind of like short burst of information and it were written out like this, and you could go at your own pace without having to worry about, you know, moving and letting somebody else have a turn with this painting and not worrying about people shuffling behind you and all this stuff, then maybe would be more interested in doing this person. So there are some sort of physical barriers that I think virtual tours and virtual or digital exhibits can help with people who are not able to get to the museum for people who, you know, even during a sensory hour, the museum might still be too much. There are ways to get

that information and those experiences to people who can't, or don't want to go to museums. But again, it's only if they're interested and it's only if that information is accessible.

Doug Blecher (19:55):

It's, it's funny. You mentioned that. Cause it makes me think back now, too. I was in, um, Newport, Rhode Island and in Newport they have all these like old homes and mansions, and I went into this one mansion. And as soon as you walk in, they give you a pair of headphones and you can like listen to a tour guide as you walk through the entire, um, you know, the entire tour from room to room. And I just remember thinking, Oh, this is so nice. It's nice and quiet. Im learning. And I could go at my own pace.

Sam Theriault (20:35):

Right? Absolutely. I've been to a couple of, um, the mansions in Newport and they're beautiful and interesting. Um, and I'm glad that memory stands out to you as, as something you like.

Doug Blecher (20:48):

Now you used to work for a company that was hired to conduct a research for a pilot study, published in the journal of museum education relating to the San Diego natural history museum, in which 10 autistic people worked at the museum to create social stories, which, which sounds fantastic because these stories can create expectations, which I think are so important, especially when you're going somewhere new. What were the positive results you, um, you observed from this project?

Sam Theriault (21:24):

And I think one of the most positive results we saw was that the educators who worked on this project with the autistic young adults ended up learning more about autism and were able to think about their work in new ways. So I remember one of the educators saying that, um, you know, their idea of the project was that they wanted it to be co-creative so that it wasn't the staff, the museum staff guiding it, but the young adults guiding it themselves, um, so that they were driving the process. So it's, to me, this is an example of, um, what co-creation and collaboration look like in a museum for a particularly marginalized community. So even though young adults with autism, weren't the people who came up with the idea for the project, which I think is something that would be beneficial in the future is to start with the audience even earlier in the process, um, is that the young adults were the ones who, so they brought the museum, brought these young adults on the spectrum in to create social stories for museums in their community, so that other people could access those social stories as pre-visit tools for going to a museum later on.

Sam Theriault (22:50):

So the young adults created resources for autistic people in their community. So with this is a classic example of nothing about us without us. So it wasn't, all these museums got together and said, let's make a social story for our museum so that autistic people coming in can have a sense of what to expect while they're here. It was a museum saying, let's get autistic people in here, take them to these museums, give them the opportunity to develop their observational skills, to develop their skills, collaborating with their peers, to help them develop communication skills so that they can share their observations and experiences in these documents with other autistic people in their community. Let's give them the opportunity to do a project that will serve their community and make them feel their contributions are valid and meaningful. And throughout that process, those young adults connected with each other, they learn more about themselves.

Sam Theriault (23:56):

They developed the language to advocate for themselves and for their needs. They made friendships that last I'd heard. There are a couple of them who are still friends, you know, years after the projects ended, which is beautiful. Um, and I'm sure as you know, I think this is a big thing for museums too, is that autistic people, especially, um, young adults and adults who once you age out of support from school are an incredibly isolated community, um, and not isolated as a community, but isolated individually from their communities. So just creating those opportunities to socialize and to connect. And then while that is happening for the museum to learn more about autistic people so that they can improve their exhibits and their programmings and just their personal approach to inclusion. Was this really awesome reciprocity that developed from this project.

Doug Blecher (24:57):

Absolutely. And have you heard of more museums that are taking the lead and trying to develop projects like or studies like this?

Sam Theriault (25:09):

So, um, I was actually just thinking about, I haven't heard of a specific project exactly like this, um, and I'm not really in touch with these folks anymore, but there is a great program out of New York that might be worth looking into if you're interested or for anybody who's in that area. It's called supporting transitions, cultural connections for adults with autism and the project, um, seeks to increase opportunities at cultural organizations, like museums for adults on the spectrum. Um, to my understanding, they do different kinds of internship and job placements and different programming, um, with the autism community, um, to provide resources and support for working. Um, so that's an example of, um, one community in particular doing that. I believe it's a network of different museums in that area that work together on this project. Um, I don't know too much about it, but it's one that I hear referenced a lot. And, um, anybody who's interested in museums in that area should look into it.

Doug Blecher (26:17):

I've met many autistic people that not only just visit museums, but would also like to work in them. What would your advice be to an autistic person that does want to pursue pursue museum education?

Sam Theriault (26:33):

So a couple of different things. The first is that there are so many different kinds of jobs in museums. Uh, there's museum education, there's, um, working with objects and doing things like curating or being a registrar data based management. Um, there's all kinds of different jobs. Um, if you have a skill and you like museums, like you can go the skill route and look in that way, you, maybe you have a particular interest, like maybe a certain aspect of history, or maybe you really like animals. So you could work at a specific history museum or as do, and sort of build your skillset around that. The sort of the thing right now is that of course, with the pandemic, the museum field is in a bit of crisis. Um, in that sense, we've had a lot of layoffs, um, especially for front of house workers who are the people that you might see on the museum floor doing interactions with people.

Sam Theriault (27:33):

Um, those are especially educators in particular. And a lot of people who were in those positions are black and people of color. They are people who are neurodivergent. Um, so it's sort of hitting marginalized groups disproportionately. So it's sort of difficult to advocate and say, come join the

museum field. I CA I can't guarantee job security for anybody, but for those who are interested in museum education specifically, I would say to one, develop your skills, um, in multiple areas. So that if you incur encounter this job insecurity, you have transferable skills. The second would pick would be to spend time now, before you even get into school or in a museum doing the work of understanding anti racism as it applies to the museum field, because that is a huge and important conversation that the museum field is tackling right now, and it's long overdue, and there's a long way to go.

Sam Theriault (28:38):

Um, but just educating yourself on those issues right now, in terms of, um, like doing a search for terms like museums are not neutral and decolonize, the museums are good places to start. And then the last piece of advice I would give is one that I heard from an author and speaker in the museum field named Elaine Gurian. Um, she came to one of our classes in school once and talked about her experience and gave us the advice. And, um, I really, I almost regret not taking this advice sooner. And that was to really just hone in on what your values are and to define them.

Doug Blecher (29:21):

I think that that's great advice.

Sam Theriault (29:26):

Um, so this author and speaker Elaine green came to our class and gave us the advice that if you are going to be entering the museum field to really hone in on your values and to write them down, to draw your line in the sand before you get into the field, because there are issues of museums, um, for instance saying that they are diverse or inclusive, but then, you know, not treating their workers right. And, um, engaging in racist or homophobic policies and actions. Um, and you need to decide ahead of time if that's something that you're going to put up with, or if it's something that you're going to walk away from and to help you with that, I would absolutely suggest having a good support system, whether that be from some kind of supported employment group. Um, if you have access to resources like that, family members, friends, um, people in informal professional networks that you find in person or online, um, and just making sure that, you know, you have some outside voices. So talk to, um, because it can be a very political field, I would say. And that includes, you know, the social politics of being in an office environment, which for me, I've, I've found very difficult to navigate in the past. Um, so having outside voices has helped with that a lot too

Doug Blecher (31:11):

Well, Sam, I, I really enjoyed the conversation. Thanks so much for joining us and giving me the opportunity to learn from you today.

Sam Theriault (31:20):

Of course, thank you so much for having me.