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Museum safeguards unique history of Lake Havasu City

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The Lake Havasu Museum of History houses all of the historical documents, artifacts, photographs and books from the pre-development era of the city to its present.

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Located within the Lake Havasu Museum of History is a slew of information that guests can immerse themselves in to learn about the history of the lakeside town that was established over 50 years ago.

Jillian Usher, the museum's interim executive director, refers to the institution as an affordable and educational outlet for families to partake in. In addition to the exhibits that are offered to the community, free youth classes are held each Saturday from noon to 1 p.m. for school-age children.

"We are by donation only [so] we created a subsidized system where low-income families can come to our space and enjoy it and not have to worry that they can't afford to get in here," Usher said. "They can actually have an experience with their kids that's educational but also fun and create memories in a way that is within our community's bracket."

The museum is headed by the Lake Havasu City Historical Society and houses all of the historical documents, artifacts, photographs and books from the pre-development era of the city to its present.

"We are the historical repository and cultural institution for Lake Havasu City," Usher said. "We have our archive and collections facility so if anybody has artifacts from Lake Havasu City they would like to donate, we are the holding facility for those. People can come and bring those here and then we preserve them, archive them and catalog them so that they are kept safe for everybody."

The main exhibits are changed on a quarterly basis to showcase a variety of elements to the museum's visitors. On display until August is the Spheres collection by local artist Jim Peterson. The collection features 200 spheres that were handcrafted in Havasu by Peterson.

The front section of the museum also houses the Havasu Rocks retail store which is under the Lake Havasu Gem and Mineral Society. The store has minerals, gems and crystals available for purchase.

"We partnered and now [Havasus Rocks] is in our front area," Usher said. "Two doors down, they have their lapidary shop where you can actually take classes and make jewelry with different kinds of rocks."

The museum, which was built in 2010, offers a youth docent program where young participants can volunteer their time in various departments throughout the institution. Usher says she has had volunteers between the ages of 11 to 18 years old participate in the program. In addition to the seven adult volunteers helping at the museum, Usher says she also has six youth volunteers that come in on a weekly basis.

“Our 16 year olds just set up this hallway and they picked out all these pictures and they placed them and curated it,” Usher said. “I’m just so proud to see their vision and to be able to give them a space where they can actually put their creativity to work and learn that museums have so many different avenues.”

Usher is currently working on a program with the local high school that will help with the expansion of the youth docent program at the museum.

“There’s a museum in nearly every city in the country so it’s a great avenue they can take to use their creativity in a way that is impactful to their community,” Usher said.

The educational aspect behind the history museum is what Usher wants visitors to know more about. Considering the artifacts that are specific to Lake Havasu City’s historical background, Usher believes that the community could benefit from the information that is kept at the museum.

“Of course, we’re historical, we do collections and archives. I don’t think people realize how big an education aspect that we are and how much education we can provide on all different levels,” Usher continued. “We are the only people who have what we have and that’s a really cool advantage because people could come here and see the museum and see something they’re not going to see anywhere else in the world.”

Since the museum is a gatekeeper for much of Havasu’s history, visitors can learn about past events and view documents that pertain to the development of the city.

“We’re the only institution in the entire world that has the information about Lake Havasu City and about the London Bridge in Lake Havasu City and about Robert McCulloch and the first restaurant in town, things like that that are so vital to history,” Usher explained. “I don’t think people realize that even though we’re just Havasu, our history has a very big international ripple. I

mean, having the London Bridge here is a huge deal. The whole world knows us because of it. It's the second most visited attraction in Arizona and it's the largest artifact ever purchased still today."

For last year's 50th anniversary that honored the London Bridge, Usher says the museum played a large part in the celebration's activities. The historical institution was able to participate in three separate events for attendees which garnered support from the city.

"I think that the city uses us as a reference point which is important. Whenever they need key information about something, they come to us which I think is very valuable because we are the archivist of the city. We hold all of this information. We have plans from when the city was being built," Usher said. "Because they turned to us and we were able to create something even more historical in the present was a really big deal and we're very proud to have been a part of [the anniversary]."

Usher is determined to preserve the artifacts that are housed at the museum to ensure they are accurate and well-kept for future use. She plans on introducing a digital platform to better help preserve the information that she currently has on hand.

"I want to take this museum to a level that is sustainable through the next ten to 15 years. I want to ensure that all of our systems are at their best functionality and our space is at its best functionality. We're doing a lot of upgrading and changing in the back room and upgrading technology," Usher said. "I think that is very important in the fact that preserving history, if we have it in a digital interface, we're more likely to save that information. Whereas just having paper copies is a gamble at this point."

Additionally, Usher plans to unveil a new membership benefit that will begin this fall. The new perk will include more access to collections through a digital program.

"It'll be a member benefit so you'll have to be a member of the museum. It'll be part of our historian package and so that'll be \$50 a person," Usher continued. "However, if you already have that membership, you'll be grandfathered into the new asset."

With clear goals in mind for the future of the museum, issues with securing appropriate funding is a challenge that Usher hopes to combat by collaborating with other local organizations.

“We are, of course, looking to any community partners who’d be interested in funding or fundraising with us,” Usher said. “Any partnership would be symbiotic in the fact that we would kind of sit with that institution to see what their goals are and see how we as an institution can help them meet those goals as well. Right now, we’re just trying to continue to work on our mission but also keep our doors open. Funding has been tough but we are open to any community partners who may be interested.”

Usher has a set of highlights she adds throughout the year that focuses on each of the museum’s main demographic areas. In the summer, her focus is more on programs for the children and families who visit the museum. During the spring season is when Usher has exhibits geared more toward tourists.

“Our key demographics that we as an institution serve are our tourists, the people that come to visit Havasu, our locals and pioneers. A pioneer is somebody who was in Lake Havasu before the bridge, technically, so the people who really lived the history that we hold. Of course, the youth and families of Havasu,” Usher said. “During the fall, we’re going to expand more local history so the center area will be a topic that we don’t have in our permanent displays but that local pioneers actually participate in creating as well.”

The future of the history museum holds promise with the shift Usher hopes to create within the establishment. She has plans to include the community in the exhibits showcased each season. The museum’s previous exhibit for veterans is an example of the community involvement Usher plans to continue.

“I want to be able to communicate the stories of Havasu in a way that the people who we are talking about feel justified and they feel like they are being well-represented. I know that was very important with our veteran exhibits we just had. The VFW actually honored us for distinguished service for that exhibit,” Usher said.

The executive director went on to mention how the exhibits were created and organized by veterans. The included memorabilia such as uniforms and banners were also curated by veterans.

“The fact that veterans were included in telling their story and they felt well-represented is how I know it was a success,” Usher continued. “I think that’s the impact that we have. We tell stories that haven’t been told before and that we tell them correctly and that we tell them in a way that is inspiring and is a way that other people in Havasu can see how much history we don’t talk about and how much more there is to Havasu.”

Looking ahead, Usher hopes that the museum will continue to flourish with the addition of new exhibits, events and activities that she plans on bringing to the institution in the coming years. She also wants the community to consider the museum as the first stopping point when they are looking for places to visit in town.

“I want us to expand our classes and be able to provide a level of education that we haven’t seen in this area before,” Usher said. “I want us to be a place that is grand and exciting and benefits the community where they can trust that we have everything safe.”

For anyone who is interested in becoming a volunteer at the history museum, Usher says she is welcome to all who want to lend a helping hand.

“I’m always taking volunteers. I need volunteers for our collections. I need exhibits. If you’re a fabricator, if you’re a designer, if you can build, if you know construction. Even if you’re a business and you’re willing to donate supplies or funds, there’s so many ways and my door is always open,” Usher said. “This place would not be possible without the volunteers. They are at the forefront of this place.”

The Lake Havasu Museum of History is located at 320 London Bridge Road. Hours of operation are Tuesday through Saturday from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Admission is by donation only.