

Vicky Shi
Supervisor: Betty Belanus

Smithsonian Folklife Festival 2012: Campus and Community Intern Report

I came to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival for the first time last year, and I remember how incredible it was to see the mall filled with tents, overflowing with participants, exhibits, and visitors. When I was selected as a Folklife Festival intern, I was ecstatic to be able to work at the heart of the festival and give others the unforgettable experience I had the previous year. Although I had a general idea about my responsibilities as an intern – pre-festival preparation and research, setting up the festival site, overseeing the festival, and post-festival evaluation – there were a few things I did not expect to do as an intern. Some of these duties were unpleasant, hauling around water coolers for instance, but most of them were pleasant surprises. I didn't expect to have the wonderful opportunity to prepare and give Festival tours, and I didn't expect to have such enriching interactions with Festival participants. Considering the apocalyptic storms, hectic evacuations from the Mall, and torturous temperatures, my time as an intern at the festival has definitely been a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Pre-Festival

Because I work part-time, I felt a little out of place when I started my first day on a Thursday, as all of the other interns had already settled into the office. I was also separated from the other interns because Intern Row was full, so it wasn't until a few weeks in that I learned everyone's names and what program they worked under. For the first few days, I worked on whatever odd jobs needed to get done. These tasks included preparing materials for Betty, filling out supply request forms for Cristina, writing and editing descriptions of participants, and designing fliers. Although the activities were a bit mundane, I understand the necessity of completing these tasks.

Even so, I was ecstatic when Betty assigned Silvia and me the exciting task of creating a tour of the Campus and Community program, especially since I love being a tour guide at my university. Silvia and I had an initial meeting to figure out the optimum length of tours and to map out a walking route, and then I set out to create a tour guide fact sheet. I used the information from the festival website to create a bullet-pointed summary of each university and also created descriptions for special areas like the Commons and Morill Performing Arts Center. I organized the information so that it followed the walking route of the tour. After I finalized the tour guide sheet, I sent a copy to Silvia so she could translate it for a Spanish-speaking tour. Creating the fact sheet was really beneficial for me as well, because I was able to familiarize myself with the Campus and Community program.

The rest of pre-festival preparation consisted of setting up the site. I spent a couple of hours a day setting up tables, stapling tablecloths, and putting tarps over various items. Even though the heat was uncomfortable, I appreciate how this internship is not a typical office job.

During the Festival

My principal responsibilities during the Festival included filling water coolers, giving tours, and filling in for whoever was absent. As a floater, I wasn't restrained to one area, so I was able to have a wonderful experience interacting with participants, watching performances, and exploring the festival.

Many of the interns joked that we should have had a strength test to get this internship – I agree. Hauling around water coolers and bags of ice in 100 degree heat is not something I'm cut out for. I don't mind filling water, as I know it's a necessity, but I feel like it was inefficient to delegate the responsibility to a handful of small girls. In the beginning, Silvia and I took on the responsibility of filling the entire program's water ourselves, which meant we were constantly running around, and we were slow in getting water coolers back to participants. By the second week, we figured out a system where interns were in charge of refilling their own section's water. Although this worked out fairly well, I think it would have been extremely helpful to have a strong volunteer specifically in charge of refilling water. Even though volunteers can't drive utility vehicles, an intern can drive while a volunteer helps to transport the water coolers. This system would be more efficient than having small girls struggle to carry and lift large water coolers. I didn't mind refilling water because it gave me something to do, but for the sake of efficiency, it might be a good idea to assign a volunteer to help with water duty.

My second major task was to give tours; however, I ended up only giving two – one to Montana State University participants and another to a participant from California State University, Fresno. I realized I should have prepared a tour that would encompass the entire festival, because most of the participants were already familiar with the Campus and Community program, which was the case with Rhonda, the participant from Fresno. To give her an all-festival tour, I coordinated with Anna, head of the Creativity and Crisis program. Unfortunately, that was the last tour I gave because no one else signed up (or, like West Virginia University, people would sign up and then not show up). I think it would have been effective to create an organized system of scheduling tours, such as an electronic sign-up through the website. It would also be good to advertise tours to visitors, because I think many visitors would appreciate a general festival tour if they do not have time to explore the festival in depth themselves. Even if I didn't give as many tours as I would have liked, I had a great time learning the festival facts, and I enjoyed meeting all of the people I gave tours to.

As a floater, I took over for other interns' sections, which happened a lot because the brutal temperatures caused interns to get sick. When I took over for Meredith in *Sustainable Solutions* and Mary Ellen for *Reinventing Agriculture*, I enjoyed getting the opportunity to meet

and interact with all of the participants in those areas. Although taking over for Kate in the Commons required me to stay in one place (which I obviously wasn't very used to), it was a good experience to deal with logistics and scheduling, and I also had the chance to listen to some fascinating discussions. Although I had a fantastic experience exploring the festival, people like Kate and Daisy were imprisoned to the schedules of their sections. Next year, it would be fair to have people like Kate and Daisy to switch off with people who have more lenient responsibilities, like a floater or intern assigned to a broad area.

My most memorable experiences from the festival come not from my intern duties, but from the interactions I had with the participants. From the University of Hawaii's tent, I learned how to make a rose out of a special leaf, how to create a constellation out of string, and about the experiences the participants had growing up in Hawaii. I learned how to play wheelchair basketball at the University of Illinois' tent, I learned about the amazing features of University of Tennessee's solar house, and I heard the inspiring story of a healer from the University of New Mexico. On the last day, I participated in Mexican laugh therapy, which literally made me laugh until I cried. I received gifts from participants from the University of Hawaii and University of New Mexico, and I made friends from all over the nation.

What I've Learned

When I began as an intern at the Folklife Festival, I wanted my career to be in the field of public relations. I thought this experience would help me with my writing, logistical, and interpersonal skills – all crucial to public relations – and I thought right. What I didn't expect is that this experience would also change my career path – I realized that I'm not cut out for a 9-5 office job. Despite the blistering heat, I loved being out at the festival, walking around and interacting with participants, much more than the days I spent at the office. So, in the hopes that I'll one day work on the festival again, I want to become an event planner. I talked to Eileen about her experience as the special events coordinator, and maybe one day I'll find my way back as an events coordinator for the Folklife Festival myself.

The people I've met have been incredible. Every single person on the Smithsonian staff is so talented and driven, and as a mere college student now, seeing the successful people in the Smithsonian "family" is an inspiration to work hard and establish myself in my own career. Thanks to Betty, who has been an incredible supervisor – always so understanding and put-together, even during the stress of the festival – not to mention, she provided us with temporary tattoos and a wonderful sushi dinner. Thanks to Cristina, who was always cheerful even in 106 degree weather and terrible humidity, and thanks to Hailey, who could always make me laugh even when I was sick and tired from hauling around water coolers all day. And of course, I love all of my fellow interns, who made working at the Festival one of the best experiences of my life.

The experience I had working at the Folklife Festival is unforgettable, and to be honest, I'm a little bit heartbroken that it's all over so fast.