



BIG Exhibits

Creating Growth for a Small Arboretum

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In 2000, Tyler Arboretum had nine full-time employees, an \$852,245 budget, a part-time visitor center, and an estimated autumn (September through November) attendance of 4,000. In fall 2001, the institution still had nine full-time employees, but a \$1,128,562 budget, a newly constructed full-time visitor center (operating whenever the Arboretum was open), and an autumn attendance of 11,678. Welcome, “Big Bugs”! This well-known traveling exhibit was our first foray into the world of temporary outdoor exhibits. Last year we

presented our fourth special exhibit, “Totally Terrific Treehouses.” For the June to October display period, our attendance rose by over 400 percent, and our admission revenue for the period jumped from \$27,344 in 2007 to \$188,662 in 2008.

Taking a Giant Leap with “Big Bugs”

Located about thirty minutes west of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the Arboretum owes its existence to two Quaker brothers with a passion for the natural world who

planted over 1,000 plants on their farm in the mid 1800s. In 1944, the last member of the family bequeathed the 650-acre property to the community. For a small organization, the idea of tackling a large exhibit like “Big Bugs” was daunting, but it was a perfect way to begin to combat the “hidden gem syndrome.” Many of you know what this is—a great organization that no one seems to know about. Being located in the horticultural Mecca of the Delaware Valley can be a challenge. The public gardens in this area are diverse and spectacular, and it can be difficult to stand apart from the crowd.

The success of Tyler Arboretum's first temporary exhibit, David Rogers' evocative "Big Bugs", convinced skeptical staff and board members that events of this type could play an important role in reaching new audiences.

"Big Bugs" was a great success, but that success did not come easily. We needed to convince some staff and board members that the exhibit was a good fit for the organization. They were concerned about spending precious time and scant resources on a temporary exhibit that some thought was more appropriate to a theme park. A major factor for our success was the advice and support from organizations that had hosted the exhibit previously. We started planning two years in advance to give ourselves time to raise the capital for both the exhibit fee and necessary site improvements to handle the expected increase in attendance. Construction of a small visitor center near the parking lot was a major facility upgrade. This was the first time we had a structure that allowed us to greet (and, therefore, record) everyone who came to the Arboretum. To help defray costs, we were able to collaborate with Morris Arboretum (hosting the exhibit the following spring) on the development and fabrication of the interpretive signs.

Staff and Board Ask "What's Next?"

It was a stretch for an organization of our size to pull off the three-month "Big Bugs" exhibit, but it was certainly worth it. People came in droves throughout the fall. Due to the events surrounding 9/11, we were not on the media radar, but word-of-mouth kept the parking lot full. Staff and volunteers noted that it was wonderful to see so many people enjoying the Arboretum, and they started commenting, "We need to do something like this again next year." We really knew we had a winner when our hesitant board members became our biggest advocates and asked, "What's next?"

Do-it-Yourself Exhibits

We wanted to keep the momentum going, but with very little time to plan and raise funds, our options were limited. We

decided to borrow the idea of having the community help create the exhibit that had been popularized with Chicago Botanic Garden's "Cows on Parade" event. Since we are an Audubon-certified Important Bird Area, it made sense to ask people to create bird houses.

"Bird Abodes" quickly took flight with a call for entries that resulted in over eighty exhibits created by professional woodworkers, home hobbyists, families, and kids. Displayed among the historic trees of the original arboretum, the elegant, beautiful, whimsical, silly, and clever bird houses charmed our visitors. We did not attract the same number of visitors as we did with "Big Bugs," but it was still a healthy boost over our normal attendance, and it kept us in the public eye. Inevitably, as the "Bird Abodes" exhibit settled in, we began planning for the next temporary display. Our large, undeveloped acreage of meadows and woodlands supports a great diversity of butterflies. "Amazing Butterflies" took place in 2004, and combined sculptures developed by the community with a 1,400-square-foot live Butterfly House. A skilled and enthusiastic Tyler board member fabricated ready-to-decorate butterfly and caterpillar kits that were distributed to the public for a small fee with a stipulation that they be decorated and returned in time for installation. Like the entries for "Bird Abodes," the butterflies and caterpillars created by community members were wonderful. The Butterfly House was also a big hit. Fabricated on a shoestring with invaluable help from volunteers, the structure was home to native butterflies along with nectar and larval food host plants. Frequent demands from visitors that the House return the following year made us realize that this "temporary" display should become a semi-permanent feature.

Homegrown exhibits are less expensive, but there are still costs to the organization. Fundraising is more difficult as, unlike a rented exhibit, there are no finished exhibits to show potential funders. And these exhibits entail much more time and energy on the part of the staff, delaying progress on other important fronts. Involving the community in helping create an exhibit has definite pros and cons.



Tyler's home-grown Bird Abodes exhibit drew nearly 100 entries from community artisans, professionals, and families.