

## The Survival of Museums and Science Centers

*August 11, 2020 (Binghamton, NY)* -- Museums and science centers—they have an eternal feeling to them. In our minds, they hold childhood memories of school trips, telescopes that allow us to peer outside our domed sky, and artifacts from a time before. And though what they hold matters greatly, they are not immortal.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on children's museums, science centers, and historic institutions in the Southern Tier. The Discovery Center of the Southern Tier, Kopernik Observatory, and Roberson Museum are facing a future of cut-backs or closures, leaving communities with less access to educational activities, special hands-on programs, and quality exhibitions.

You may have read about the [American Alliance of Museums' \(AAM\) newly-released survey](#) of U.S. museums' response to the COVID-19 pandemic—16 percent of these institutions are facing closure in the next year with 17 percent unsure of their future. And while many may not close, they will face cutbacks to the detriment of the communities in which they live.

Overnight, all income streams were gone: admissions, major fundraisers, school visits, classes, and workshops.

Onsite visits represent only a small portion of community engagement efforts, with so much important work happening outside of the public eye. This has always been true, but perhaps even more so in these institutions' responses to the pandemic.

The Discovery Center of the Southern Tier continued to serve families by providing emergency childcare services to area families, including the children of essential workers. At the same time, with the aim of continuing to offer fun educational experiences for children, they began offering weekly on-line storybook readings, hands-on arts and crafts tutorials, and tours of exhibits.

“As a hands-on children's museum, our focus has always been on providing children the opportunity to learn through play. While our doors were closed, we focused on ways to help parents do just that with their children,” said Jessie Stone He, the Discovery Center's Executive Director. “Last week, after months of planning and incorporating a variety of COVID related safety improvements and enhanced cleaning procedures, our doors finally reopened. We remain committed to the vision of offering a hands-on learning experience, but we know it may be quite a while before many families feel comfortable returning. We have been considering a variety of alternative revenue streams, but we know it's going to be a tough road ahead.”

Kopernik Observatory & Science Center offered the public a way to continue their life-long learning by taking their public engagement online when scientific guidance was to avoid public gatherings. Speakers that would have otherwise presented at Kopernik were connected to Kopernik's YouTube channel, where families could watch the presentations and ask questions of the speaker through the Chat window. When comet NEOWISE made an appearance in the

evening sky, Kopernik offered a livestream of the comet along with a live sky tour of Jupiter and Saturn through Kopernik's telescopes and provided live commentary. Viewers literally from around the world watched live and asked how they could see the comet.

Kopernik's busiest time of the year is summer, when they offer STEM-themed summer camps. Kopernik retooled their summer camps to be a virtual camp. Materials were sent to the students to use during the camp and parent feedback was very positive. They were even able to arrange for students to talk to an astronaut on the International Space Station as a part of their camp experience.

As engaging as the online programs have been, the revenue generated doesn't come close to the income needed to keep museums and science centers afloat.

The Roberson Museum and Science Center took exhibitions online to make up for the closure, providing weekly tours and follow-along Zoom classes for kids to do at home, as well as digital activities. They packaged and assembled educational care packages for families who lacked a stable internet connection. And now that Roberson is open, they're continuing to put together a blend of online and in-person activities, lectures, and workshops to provide for those are and aren't ready to come to Roberson.

"Roberson is one of the core cultural institutions in this community," said Michael Grasso, Executive Director. "During this challenging period, we've worked hard to maintain the service the community has come to expect from us. But these are frightening times for museums and the unknowns about the future outweigh the certainties. Anyone who was waiting to break the emergency glass and increase their support may want to consider doing so now; no one wants to look back and think, 'I could have helped.'"

Each one of these organizations continues to support families and community members by delivering on the promises made upon their founding—to educate and provide a place where people can explore. No one wants to imagine a world where they cannot walk into their past, where their children can't learn through play, and where we cannot see what lies just beyond our orbit. No one wants to imagine a void.

Support is needed now to ensure the doors remain open, the lights stay on, and employees can still educate and entertain the community.

Donate directly to your favorite institution, share our posts on social media, appeal to area funders to use their resources to support, write and call your representatives.

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