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Free field trip program inspires Oklahoma pride in state's students

OKLAHOMA CITY – Several thousand students found new Oklahoma heroes last year when they toured the Gaylord-Pickens Oklahoma Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City as part of its new free field trip program. Forty-five hundred students will have that same opportunity in the 2009-2010 school year, thanks to an ongoing literate communities grant from the Dell Foundation and a donation from the Museum's Teen Board.

Created in 2008 in response to educator feedback that economic factors were making it increasingly difficult to authorize field trips, the program also offers teachers the option of free lunches for each student or a gas card to help with transportation costs.

“Teaching our state's future leaders the importance of their Oklahoma heritage and sharing with them the accomplishments of the people who've made our state what it is today is at the very heart of our mission, and the Free Field Trip program allows us to do that in a big way,” said Shannon L. Nance, president of the Gaylord-Pickens Oklahoma Heritage Museum and Oklahoma Heritage Association. “We are very grateful that the Dell Foundation and our Teen Board recognized the importance of sharing that valuable educational experience and made this program possible.”

While students who visited the high-tech, interactive Museum in the 2008-2009 school year were amazed by the many plasma screens and computer touch screens, teachers were most impressed with how much their students learned.

“I thought cowboys like Jim Shoulders were just in movies – I didn't know he was a real cowboy!” wrote Brooklynn, a student at Eastlake Elementary School, in a thank-you note to her Museum tour guide. “I also didn't know Shannon Lucid flew in outer space! I bet she had so much fun. I learned Jim Thorpe was a great athlete, and I'm not surprised a king called him the greatest athlete in the world.”

Open since May 2007, the Museum focuses on telling Oklahoma's story through its people, helping students like Brooklynn gain a better understanding of our state's history. The Oklahoma Through Its People Gallery's video-driven exhibits showcase individuals like country music superstar Reba McEntire, aviation innovator Wiley Post, author Ralph Ellison and BMX bike rider Mat Hoffman. The Oklahoma Hall of Fame Gallery pays tribute to the 628 individuals who have been inducted since 1921, and offers visitors an opportunity to test their Oklahoma knowledge in a computer-based quiz. Each visitor can become part of Oklahoma history by sharing and recording stories about their own heritage in the ONEOK Tell Your Story exhibit.

“We have taken great strides to include people from a diverse range of industries, backgrounds, socio-economic status and age so that everyone who comes to the Museum will find someone with whom they can connect,” said Nance. “We are most proud of the energy and effort that has gone into the Museum when a student discovers a new role model or ambition after meeting one of the Oklahomans in our exhibits.”

Committed to supporting educational and literacy services programs in the communities where Dell employees live and work, the Museum's free field trip program was a natural fit for a literate communities grant from the Dell Foundation. Dell's grant funded 2,500 field trips in the 2008-2009 school year and another 2,500 this year. The funding provided by the Association & Museum's Teen Board was raised by a Battle of the Bands competition.

Approximately half of the free field trips for the 2009-2010 school year are allocated to any Oklahoma school and will be filled on a first-come, first-served basis. The other half is allocated to at-risk students in Oklahoma County.

To download an application for the Museum's free field trip program or for more information about the Museum, visit www.oklahomaheritage.com or call 405.235.4458.

The Oklahoma Heritage Association is an 82-year-old non-profit organization committed to preserving Oklahoma history and promoting pride in our great state. Through each of its programs and the Gaylord-Pickens Oklahoma Heritage Museum, the Association strives to tell Oklahoma's story through its people.

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