

RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

Edgar Allan Poe, Robert E. Lee, Arthur Ashe. At first glance what connects these three names? Richmond, Virginia. Once the confederate capital, more recently the home of prominent African-American historical figures like Maggie L. Walker and Arthur Ashe (the first female African-American bank president, and the only Black man to win single titles at Wimbledon, the U.S. Open, and the Australian Open), Richmond is part of the



ongoing debate between preserving a controversial history and capturing and celebrating the diversity of its residents and historical figures.

The variety of historical narratives alone draw hundreds of thousands of annual tourists, and Richmond is at an additional advantage from being along the I-95 corridor—the main thoroughfare on the east coast that runs parallel to the Atlantic Ocean connecting large cities like Boston, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, New York,

and Jacksonville. I-95 brings tourists through the city, but it also allows for residents to live in a mid-sized city while still being connected to larger metropolitan areas. With this tourism and a growing downtown population, Richmond features a vibrant urban scene, one that's thriving from the improved infrastructure allowing commercial walking districts along the James River and downtown Canal Walk. "River City" is also known for its prolific street art and murals from several internationally renowned artists.

In an interview with Erika Gay, the Urban Fellow in Richmond, the city stood out as a prime example of balance, flexibility, and creativity in implementing the principles of the Urban Agenda.

The primary activation of the Urban Agenda principles in Richmond was through the creation of a project committee that convened ten community partners and NPS staff to select and implement Urban Agenda-related projects. This committee tackled eight primary projects ranging from improving transportation and increasing accessibility of urban parks—primarily within the James River Park System; facilitating quarterly youth workshops supporting youth programs and providing

networking opportunities for program leaders in the region; and several other urban-oriented community efforts. This endeavor showcased an effort to work outside of national park boundaries that successfully connects new audiences to their "backyard" urban parks.

The other major goal for NPS staff in Richmond and Gay was infusing the three principles into existing programs. Instead of trying to start new programs outside of those of the Project Committee organizations, NPS found several ways to update and enhance existing programming. With the Urban Archaeology Program for example, NPS recognized the combined capacity of Groundwork RVA and the Park Service, and was able to not only bring the existing program to Richmond, but additionally was able to connect the final archaeology and historic preservation presentations by youth to the low-income communities around where the project took place.



LESSONS LEARNED

Branding, Advertising, and External Communication

Activating the Urban Agenda reinforced that the National Park Service is viewed as a valuable partner—the community is often eager to work with NPS. But with that strong brand, “the National Park Service does not always prioritize external communication, including communication with media, surrounding communities, park partners, and visitors,” Gay noted. She pointed to the increase of PR for the Find Your Park centennial campaign. In Richmond NPS saw positive impacts in the community in the form of increased attention, attendance, and positive reinforcement from the community on public lands-based initiatives and programs.

Demonstrating and Instilling the Principles by Example

With the charge to implement this new way of working came the realization that, “There’s no lack of interest from park staff or from the community to engage directly in collaboration or discussion of relevancy and inclusion. It’s most often a lack of experience or expertise in how and where to make that dialogue take place,” Gay remarked. Gay and the cohort of NPS

superintendents and leadership were able to tackle this by leading by example. By being clear about the facilitation tools they used in meetings with NPS staff and/or partners they illustrated firsthand what applying the three principles looks like in practice. This was buttressed by allowing space for less experienced staff to facilitate a meeting, giving them the opportunity to test their skills and get feedback from their colleagues on how well they understand and implement the Urban Agenda into their daily practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NPS

In recommending ways to further Urban Agenda implementation, Gay had two main points. She stressed that the Urban Agenda “goes beyond new projects, or implementing the three principles through large-scale, one-time activities. Instead it’s about embedding the principles into the Park Service’s standards and behaviors moving forward.” Single events can be a premier way to test a concept, but successful implementation of this way of working requires sustainable events that continue to support innovative community engagement and galvanize non-federal

partners around the same principles. Not all parks have the capacity with existing staff to prioritize long-term programming

however; Gay recommends utilizing the newly created position description based on the Urban Fellow position. Officially listed as the Program Specialist (Community Engagement) position at the



supervisory level, Gay hopes this position description, which was the work of both fellows and NPS staff, can be utilized multiple ways. Ideally, whether contracting or hiring within NPS, parks could hire this specialist to prioritize long-term programming. But for parks without ample funding, Gay recommends pulling associated duties of the fellow into the position descriptions for existing staff. Though this is less than the ideal of a dedicated engagement specialist, Gay notes that it still leads to more enriching and sustainable programming if the principles of the Urban Agenda are interwoven with the work of all staff.

