

Breaking Down Barriers Through Dialogue

CINCINNATI (May 2, 2001) -- In 2004, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center will invite visitors to join an interracial dialogue as part of a three stage, "Concluding Experience." Preliminary focus group research has produced positive results. This research will guide the development of the final stage in a visit to the Freedom Center.

According to Edwin Rigaud, president and CEO of the Freedom Center, "Our goal is to shed history's light on contemporary freedom issues, and to promote interracial/inter-group cooperation through meaningful dialogue inspired by our history." The Concluding Experience will occupy 4,200 square feet of exhibition space with multiple forms of feedback including electronic polling.

Research on interracial dialogue and the final experience has been ongoing for more than three years. In January, however, the Freedom Center began conducting focus groups nation-wide with Viewpoint Learning, a California firm that advances dialogue-based learning.

The lead researcher on the project is Daniel Yankelovich, a well known social scientist, author, and founder of Viewpoint Learning. He is thrilled by the potential of the Freedom Center to break down barriers between people.

"Americans have reached a point in our evolution as a society," he says, "where we accept the idea of diversity but aren't yet comfortable talking across racial lines, especially the line between Black and White." This initiative is being conducted in partnership with the National Conference for Community and Justice. The focus groups have been held in Cincinnati; Cambridge, MA; Los Angeles; and New York. The results of this research will serve as the foundation for the visitor experience.

The three-stage format for the Concluding Experience is intended to provide visitors with multiple ways to process and offer feedback on their experiences at the Freedom Center. Plans call for the experience to be divided into Respond, Reflect and Resolve areas. These multimedia rich sectors will highlight current day issues of freedom worldwide, provide electronic polling options, and invite visitors for a brief facilitated discussion and dialogue.

In his best-selling book, *The Magic of Dialogue*, Yankelovich examines practical ways to foster dialogue as opposed to debate. He notes that dialogue is a special kind of discourse using distinctive skills to achieve two results: mutual understanding (at the level of thought) and mutual respect and trust (at the level of feelings).

Yankelovich's research reveals that "Dialogue captures people at a moment when they are ready to open up to one another. Our research project is designed to make the dialogue between the races go smoothly – to help people overcome their stiffness so that they can talk directly, openly, and honestly in genuine dialogue."

The concluding experience design plan is being led by Rita Organ, director of exhibits and collections for the Freedom Center, in cooperation with Bob Harness, Vice President/Creative

Director, Jack Rouse Associates. Other team members include representatives of Viewpoint Learning; David Campt, formerly Policy Associate with The President's Initiative on Race and currently Director of the National Center for Cultural Healing; Tammy Bormann, Human Relations Consultant; and Jeff Hayward, Director of People, Places, and Design Research.

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