



A conversation with newly appointed Chester County Historical Society President Robert Lukens, PhD.

On September 8, 2011, the Chester County Historical Society announced the appointment of Robert Lukens, PhD, as its new President, effective October 3, 2011.

Q: During your tenure as Exhibits and Education Director at the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center (CVC), what accomplishments are you most proud of?

A: It was an incredible experience. The CVC had just opened in fall 2008 and I arrived in summer 2009. I led the organization's exhibition program and educational initiatives with a talented professional staff. The exhibition was fairly well established. Our biggest challenge was infusing the organization with a broad range of educational opportunities, which it lacked.

It took a long time, working through extensive developmental and approval processes, but eventually we were able to launch many meaningful programs. I'm particularly proud of my staff's ability to develop engaging programs, publications, and online offerings for families, teachers, and school groups. Making the history of the Capitol and functions of Congress accessible to young audiences is not an easy job, but they did stellar work which was well-received across Capitol Hill. We were also able to implement two significant online exhibitions as well, one which receives nearly 30,000 page views per month. In the end, we drew great satisfaction from enhancing the educational experience for the more than 2 million annual visitors from all over the globe.

Q: What do you feel you bring to this position here at the Chester County Historical Society? What made this position attractive to you?

A: I'm honored to have been chosen for this position and feel like it's the opportunity of a lifetime. I have a deep passion for preserving, interpreting, and promoting Chester County's past. That's an essential part of who I am as an individual and professional, and being away from the county for a couple of years has made that even more evident for me. That love for the county's heritage is the fuel that will keep me going during the good times and tough challenges ahead.

Passion can, however, only get you so far. Fundraising will, of course, comprise a major part of my work. I enjoy fundraising activities and have missed it while working for the federal government. The position will require a healthy mix of day-to-day management all while adhering to broad long-range plans. Also, I don't mind the administrative details that might deter others, such as property oversight, policies, and financial monitoring. My academic understanding and technical experience will help provide a solid foundation for leading the organization.

Although I've always had a dreamer side to me, my experience has provided me with a strong dose of realism that I'll take into this job. At this stage in my career, I'm definitely not a "build it and they will come" kind of guy.

With most all organizations I've worked for, I've been involved in leading change. At the Chemical Heritage Foundation, it was a new collections and exhibition program. At Historic Yellow Springs, it was the merger with the Chester Springs Studio. At the CVC, my challenge was advocating the

formation of educational programs. At CCHS, our challenge is remaining relevant and fiscally healthy in an era when all non-profits are experiencing declining funding opportunities.

Ultimately, I will rely heavily on the talented individuals around me at CCHS. I gain great satisfaction from facilitating success, from leading people and projects to end up with profound, perspective-altering services for our audiences. That's what I see as the ultimate reward here.

Q: Like most other historical organizations across the U.S., CCHS has seen many challenges in the last decade. How will you address some of these lingering issues such as budget concerns, endowment and capital needs, audience development? What is your vision for the organization?

A: I look forward to helping continue the great work that Kim Hall did in strengthening the organization's finances. Building financial security is priority number one for me. At the end of the day, that's what allows us to preserve the county's heritage, teach about it, and enable staff to do their jobs. There is, however, an iterative process between expanding an organization's programming (exhibits, preservation, education, etc.) and its finances. Focusing on just one won't work – they have to move forward in tandem. We are, after all, here to serve our mission first and foremost.

One way we can serve that mission is by looking at how we use technology, which has transformed how people learn and participate in museums. Successful 21st century museums function more like forums than lecture halls or stagnant display spaces. Information sharing and letting go of authority fosters deep learning, which can happen in the museum, classroom, or the web. People experience the past differently today. More than ever, museums still need to play their traditional role as places of authenticity, but they also need to let go and allow their visitors to shape their own experiences.

We need to adapt to these changes and recognize these trends in order to provide the county's 500,000 residents with deeply meaningful learning opportunities. In my mind, our organization is not just about Chester County's past, but how the past contributes to our identity. Our goal is to help people learn about what it means to be a Chester Countian today by looking at its past. Who are we? What traits do we share and how are we beautifully diverse? These are the questions we'll seek to answer by looking at the past, or perhaps I should say, we'll allow our audiences to discover these answers for themselves.

In these challenging times, institutions like CCHS need to really think deeply about what their core mission is and stick to it, and do it well. From there, it is important to rely on donors who support organizations because they're doing good work and staying disciplined, and not getting distracted by flash in the pan ideas. Museums need to foster relationships with those who believe in what they're doing instead of spending too much time chasing dollars through earned income, admission, or special events proceeds. Those things have their place but they should be supplementary, not fundamental, funding sources.

Q: How would you like CCHS to relate to its community? What will you do to help the organization become more integrated into the community?

A: Open dialogue. We will seek out and find ways to hear from our communities (there are many) about what we can do for them. Some of these will be formal evaluation methods, but more likely it will be the informal feedback that will help us better connect to our communities. This is not a one-

way street. We expect to hear from established and new residents, young and old Chester Countians, school groups and specialized researchers, and diverse audiences about their needs. We can't be all things to all people, but we can certainly go through the effort of understanding our audiences and making sure our initiatives match the current reality and a relevance litmus test.

I feel particularly strong about reaching out to the K-12 educational community across the county. Knowing how we can help social studies, history, and civics teachers educate their students using the local lens is very important to CCHS.

Q: What are your impressions of CCHS's Board of Directors and staff?

A: The people of the organization are its greatest asset – that was clear from the start and one of the main reasons I came to CCHS. The staff has incredible talent, knowledge, and passion for their work. The board is dynamic, smart, and dedicated to thinking outside of the box to advance the organization.

Q: What are your thoughts on CCHS's history education programs and exhibitions?

A: Relevance – they must be relevant. Although they both have their value and we will continue to do both, I prefer thematic over collections-based exhibitions and programs. People really engage more with stories than with most stand-alone objects. The collections should serve to promote a powerful educational message that has deep meaning to the lives of our visitors. Educational programs and exhibitions need to be fully integrated. Instead of isolated exhibits or one-off special school programs, I want the institution to think about broad, holistic initiatives that incorporate all facets of the organization (museum collections, library, programming, fundraising, marketing, etc.).

I also believe that history is, by its nature, interdisciplinary. It needs to be taken out of a vacuum and discussed in other contexts. We need to use it to connect to our audiences through art, science, government, and the environment.

One particular challenge we will have is how to make that connection while many potential audience members (particularly students) won't have a chance to visit CCHS. The conundrum is this - object-based learning can be incredibly powerful. And I believe in the sanctity of original objects, and how encounters with authentic objects, art, archives, and documents move individuals. How can we harness that power when we might not be able to get everyone in the door?

Specific initiatives I'd like to pursue include looking at technology through the lens of local history, exploring the county's food heritage, and reaching out to diverse communities across the county.

Q: Why do you like history? What do you see as the value of history? Why have you chosen to pursue public history, rather than academic history?

A: History is an infinite pursuit for me - understanding it, teaching it, preserving it, etc. My entire career has been sparked by that intellectual curiosity – the pursuit of something we can't ever fully understand.

But it's not a fascination with specific historical facts, dates, names, places, or events that keeps me going. I love the totality of it and have a conviction that humans benefit from learning about the past.

Our history allows us to gain an understanding and appreciation of the present. That understanding informs decisions, forges identity, and provides lessons and inspiration. Anyone that thinks history is lifeless or stale doesn't pay attention to the news or politics - it's everywhere, and as a museum professional I am compelled to help audiences realize that.

In contrast to academia, in the realm of public history, you can touch your audiences directly. Although I love reading, research, and writing, I want to see people gasping, smiling, even crying when they are moved by their past. As a father of two young kids, I feel that one of the greatest rewards this line of work gives is witnessing children marveling at their heritage.

Q: What about other personal interests?

A: For me, it's difficult to have personal interests when I love my work so much and spend as much time as possible with my family. Any real spare time left over gets filled in with reading and writing, exercising, and working on miscellaneous home renovations (another "infinite pursuit"). I aim to publish a book from my dissertation, "American Arctic Exploration: A Social and Cultural History, 1890-1930," but that will take several years. I keep telling my wife that I want to get back to seriously playing the guitar, but I'm not sure when I'll ever have time to do that!