

# Immigrant Teens Tell Their Story

by Douglas Simpson



The exhibitions mounted at the Newton History Museum are typical for a small history museum: exhibits on 19th century life, local architectural styles, the development of the town, and the town's connection to larger issues and history such as the underground railroad. Recently though, this suburban Boston museum tried something different, both in content and in process. They turned the curatorial role over to outsiders, teenagers in fact, and recruited seven local high school students from immigrant families to curate an exhibition about themselves.

What prompted such a radical departure from the norm? Initially, there was an impetus to mount an exhibition on immigration with the standard focus on the various waves of immigrants coming to the town. The museum had done shows like this in the past, but the time seemed ripe to explore more recent immigrants, from countries like China, Russia, and Mexico. One curator was inspired by a National Geographic article featuring interviews with teen immigrant stories. She suggested an approach featuring individual stories, and the exhibition found its voice. The director had ambitions for the museum to do more outreach to the schools and town youth. All this gelled into an exhibition about teen immigrants, by teen immigrants.

With few teens or recent immigrants as visitors, this was a welcome opportunity for NHM to expand its audience. An exhibition produced by teens would, it was hoped, be more relevant to teens, more immediate in tone, and attract teenage friends and immigrant families. There certainly was a story here. According to the museum, "Between 1990 and 2000, the foreign-born population of Newton increased by more

than 40 percent. As of 2000, more than 15,000 foreign-born people called Newton home." This is in a city of about 84,000.

## The Process

The first step was finding the teens. The museum reached out to the two local high schools, speaking with the guidance counselors and appropriate teachers, as well as organizations like a Chinese cultural society and a Russian math school. They hoped to represent as much diversity as possible. In the end they received 22 applications and after individual interviews selected seven, representing China (including Hong Kong), Russia, Korea, and Mexico. The museum was aiming for representation from more countries, but a tight schedule and unfortunate timing (trying to recruit during state testing) hampered their success in eliciting broader interest.

The selected students made a significant commitment. They met weekly for nearly six months. Snacks and drinks were an essential part of the success (and conviviality) of these meetings. A small stipend was paid to each student, and while none of the students enlisted for the money, it did help shore up commitment. This was not volunteer work; the students were hired to do a job.

## The Design

I was pleased to be engaged as the exhibition designer for this fascinating project. The students had already been meeting for a few months before I came on board. They wanted to convey something about their individual experiences, and they wanted to integrate objects, photographs, and artwork that supported their stories. The students were the client. I listened to their ideas, suggested design

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Seven high school students curated the show. Courtesy of Newton History Museum.

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possibilities and alternatives, and let them guide the project. They approved every element of the exhibition, from colors, to fonts, to the overall concept. So the process had a dual nature. They were crafting their individual stories and also learning about the exhibition design process.

After exploring their visions together, it became clear to me that the design challenge was to provide a framework where students could have the freedom to present their own individual stories while maintaining an overall look for the exhibition that conveyed the theme. The students liked the word “hyphenated” as a way to describe themselves. It’s a simple device for conveying the dual identities they were thinking about and that connected them all. So the title became: ***Hyphenated-Origins: Going Beyond the Labels.***

Life-size contour cut images of the students were cable suspended from the ceiling. They spun and had maps on the backs showing their

native countries. This immediately let visitors know this was an exhibition about seven young people. To make patently obvious the meaning of the title (and have a little fun with it) each photo cutout had the student holding a placard stating a hyphenated identity, i.e., “Hi, I’m Mexican-American.”

The fabrication budget was next to nothing so the display cases to protect the student’s personal objects had to be extremely simple. Some of the objects displayed included: a childhood dress, dolls, a child’s military uniform, a calligraphy scroll, and family photos. The cases were shallow with cut frosted vinyl viewing windows that defined focus areas for the objects while providing a background for the text. One of my favorite features involved students using permanent markers to hand write object captions on the acrylic. The students developed the background for their individual cases as well. Some wanted a simple painted background; others decorated theirs with things like stamps, wall paper, and posters.

In our small 200 ft<sup>2</sup> gallery we decided to ignore all the historic detailing (moldings, doors, and window niches) and instead painted it a dark color with vibrant cases and cut-outs in the foreground all arranged in a flowing curve. This was a different sort of exhibition at the Newton History Museum, and the look needed to reflect that. The students wanted to be sure all members of their nationality could enjoy the exhibition so a translation was provided in adjacent literature pockets. We all would have liked to incorporate audio media in the exhibition, but given our razor thin production budget and our already short schedule, it just wasn’t possible.



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### The Stories

The theme was identity, and the introductory wall featured questions at the heart of the exhibition.

Where is my home?  
Am I an American?  
Who am I?  
Who do other people think I am?

The students related their experiences of this dual identity in unvarnished terms.

After relating her memories of coming to the US at four and of her grandma's cooking, the Mexican girl wrote:

The stereotypes are real, and my family and I battle them every day. Sure, there are Hispanic people who are uneducated, ignorant and rude, and yes, there are vicious Mexican gangsters. But there are also Hispanic, in my case Mexican, people who really care about our quality of life and try to conduct ourselves with dignity.

A girl who emigrated from Hong Kong only one year earlier wrote of her experience:

I try. I try to talk, but no one listens.  
I try. I try to tell who I am, but no one hears. I try. I try to be friends to the people, but they just walk away. Because I am different. What's the difference? We are all human beings. What is the difference between us? Our race, our languages, our homes? But it doesn't matter to me. Because I know we're human, we don't have any differences.

It was not uncommon to find visitors in tears after reading this one.

The museum staff did act as editors for the student's writing, but their role was mostly helping the students understand the difference between writing a term paper and writing for a museum audience, not vetting content.



Translucent cases with viewing windows to personal artifacts form the background for each student's narrative. Courtesy of Douglas Simpson.

### Closing Thoughts

Of course, the museum staff would have done some things differently, but despite the hectic schedule, lack of front-end student peer evaluation, and a museum administration distracted by a transition in leadership and



One of our many meetings with the student curators. Courtesy of Newton History Museum.

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shift in priorities, the opening was one of best attended in the museum's history. The exhibition attracted more school groups than any previous temporary exhibition. Most important, the museum succeeded with its primary goal of reflecting and communicating inclusiveness: the student curators continued their connection by leading after school workshops and more teens and immigrants visited than ever before. ☀

To see the on-line exhibition:

<http://www.ci.newton.ma.us/jackson/hyphenated-origins/index.html#>

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