



Making *Invisible: Slavery Today* Visible

by Dina Bailey, Jamie Glavic and Leslie Mooney

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The struggle for freedom is as old as humanity itself; at least as old as the ancient institution of slavery. The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, hereafter referred to as the Freedom Center, is located in Cincinnati, Ohio, and resides on the banks of the Ohio River, a river that once served as the divide between slavery and freedom. This institution reveals stories about freedom's heroes, both historic and contemporary, challenging and inspiring everyone to take courageous steps for freedom today. As a museum of conscience, the Freedom Center takes seriously its responsibility to illustrate the continuum of slavery while emphasizing the need today for individual accountability, relevancy, and advocacy around contemporary freedom issues.

Background on the Freedom Center

Since its grand opening in 2004, the Freedom Center has used the foundation of the Underground Railroad and historical slavery to increase visibility of modern freedom struggles. With a focus on the three core values of courage, cooperation, and perseverance, as well as sensitivity to everyday freedom heroes throughout the ages, the Freedom Center takes seriously its mandate to advance advocacy. In 2008, the Freedom Center was discussing internally an initiative to bring the issue of modern slavery around the world to the exhibition floor in a way that would visibly renew the institution's commitment to its mission, values, and advocacy efforts. This project would also require a significant capital improvement venture.

The Impact of the Financial Crisis

The housing market collapse of 2008

and the subsequent global economic recession that followed presented a crisis in all sectors of the American economy—corporate, government, and not-for-profit, including arts and culture institutions. Like nearly every museum in the country, the Freedom Center has typically received its financing from a combination of the following: private funding from individuals, corporations, and foundations; earned revenue (admissions, café, retail, memberships, and facility rental); and government grants. During the Freedom Center's 2009 fiscal and calendar year, each of those funding categories suffered a considerable reduction, resulting in a substantial operating deficit and the Freedom Center's worst fundraising year on record. While decisions made by consumers quickly began to affect revenue generation, it also became clear that large capital/financial support would be very difficult to secure. In only its fifth year of operation, the Freedom Center did not have a sizeable endowment to cover costs or a consistent source of revenue from local, state, or national government institutions. Like many other museums in the nation, the Freedom Center was subsequently forced to make considerable reductions in both staff and operating expenses.

This downsized labor force significantly influenced the programmatic departments and their efforts to disseminate the institution's mission through various exhibitions, programs, and initiatives. This did not dampen expectations, however, as so often happens in small museums and with a reduction in force; the remaining staff members were expected to take on major increases in responsibility while maintaining the

high standard of excellence set since the inception of the institution. While the economic collapse was presenting problems that threatened the successful running of the Freedom Center and other like institutions, the Freedom Center Board and staff leadership were reaffirming the institution's commitment to educate and inspire constituents to fight against the scourge of contemporary slavery. The Board-approved strategic plan, revised in 2008, stated that the vision of the Freedom Center was to be and be recognized as a leading catalyst for eliminating slavery today and advancing human freedom, dignity, and reconciliation for all. The desire to refocus our efforts to aid in the elimination of contemporary slavery through awareness and education was solid; however, securing the necessary capital to fund a new exhibition on the issue would prove exceptionally difficult.

Fulfilling Our Mission in Difficult Times

The Board and staff leadership were firmly behind the 2008 vision. At the same time, Curatorial Fellow Dina Bailey had fewer staff and resources to create a "blockbuster" exhibition. She was also aware that within the Freedom Center's current exhibition space, there was little in-depth discussion of contemporary slavery or other modern freedom struggles. She was left to determine a direction that was both mission-driven and economically viable. The choices were clear: replace the old traveling panel exhibition with a new one, create a new permanent exhibition, or create a new virtual exhibition.

The exhibition team proposed the complete renovation of approximately



Original Invisible: Slavery Today traveling exhibition. Courtesy of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.

5,000 square feet of exhibition space within the Freedom Center in order to create a new, permanent exhibition on contemporary slavery. This would accomplish multiple goals—the needed updating of exhibition space, the incorporation of contemporary slavery into the permanent galleries, and the potential awareness draw of governmental agencies, not-for-profit agencies, and individual advocates from around the world. There was also an expectation that the awareness focused on this subject area and the Freedom Center itself would allow for continued fundraising to either create supplementary programs/initiatives or create a traveling exhibition based on the permanent version.

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Despite being armed with a compelling vision by the exhibition team the Development Department still had a difficult time meeting capital goals; during the recession, many corporate, foundation and individual donors chose to concentrate their giving on programs and institutions that provided basic human necessities, and were thus providing fewer donations to capital projects specifically or to arts and culture institutions generally. Few individual donors were increasing their levels of funding; in fact many were simply maintaining or reducing their giving.

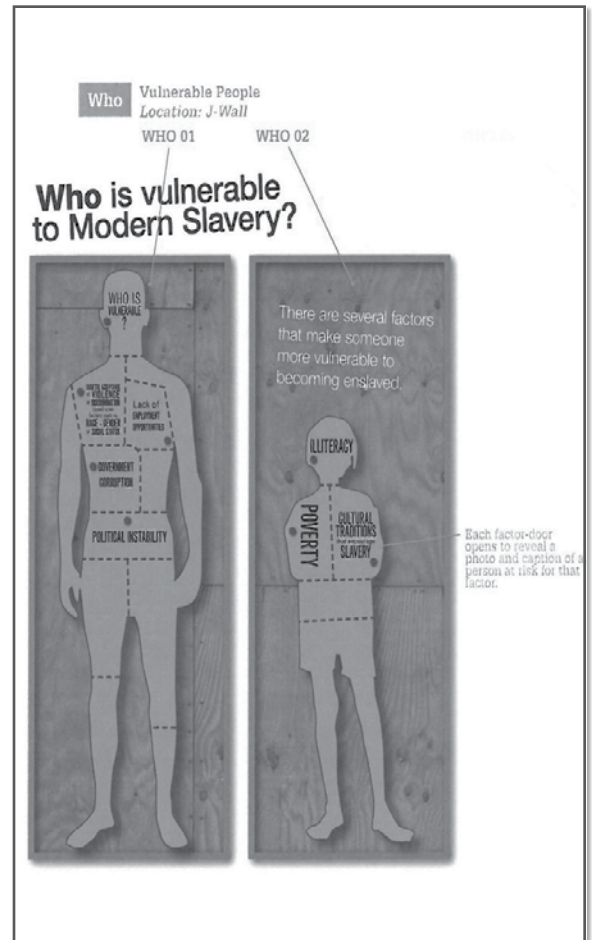
The Freedom Center's then Manager of Corporate and Foundation Relations, Leslie Mooney, pursued many new prospective high-end donors. Although these donors' recent priorities had been aligned with the strategic direction of the Freedom Center and the new potential exhibition titled *Invisible: Slavery Today*, their responses were now disappointingly negative. At the same time, the Development Department was still expected to continue pursuit of other operating and programmatic dollars, creating an internal funding competition.

The Challenge of Reallocation of Funding

As development staff worked to solicit a major sponsor for the exhibition from a new funding source, members of the Board and the Freedom Center's CEO were talking with existing donors about directing some of their support toward the *Invisible: Slavery Today* exhibition. The risk with this strategy was that existing donors might choose to completely redirect their

contributions from operating expenses or previously budgeted programs to a new, capital project rather than increasing their already agreed upon donation. This would have compromised one of the intended outcomes of the exhibition initiative: to raise the Freedom Center's profile in the contemporary slavery movement through educational and advocacy outreach efforts.

Due to the lackluster response from new donors in late 2009, Freedom Center leadership made the critical decision to approach an ongoing individual



Invisible: Slavery Today rendering by Touch Worldwide, Inc. Courtesy of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.

foundation donor. This donor had already given a substantial gift toward the naming of a changing exhibition gallery and had created a seven-figure challenge grant for the purposes of endowing contemporary slavery initiatives at the Freedom Center. This benefactor believed so strongly in the educational power of the *Invisible: Slavery Today* exhibition that he allowed the reallocation of a portion of the endowment funds to be used for outright expenditures for the new exhibition and its promotion. Though the acceptance of this reallocation did not come without significant deliberation, ultimately the decision allowed the exhibition team to take critical steps in renovating the existing space to house the world's only museum-quality, permanent exhibition on contemporary slavery.

Moving Forward

With initial funding secured, the exhibition team was able to focus on the design and fabrication of the permanent exhibition. Always aware of the additional financial strain that the exhibition was placing on the institution as a whole, the exhibition team worked diligently to minimize costs when they could. While the team used local companies whenever possible, they also directed third party design consultants, Touch Worldwide, Inc., to keep their costs down by using local/regional fabricators. In addition to the reduction of construction/fabrication costs, some pro bono work was secured in the area of marketing and technical equipment as the Freedom Center's exhibition grew closer to its grand opening.

Securing the initial funding created the momentum needed by the Freedom



Entrance to *Invisible: Slavery Today*. Courtesy of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.

Center's Development Department to leverage a larger gift that eventually made *Invisible: Slavery Today* a reality. With funding in hand to begin demolition and having selected Touch Worldwide, Inc. through a competitive RFP process, the Freedom Center was able to present preliminary space layouts and designs for the exhibition to an

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existing donor—a couple—who had given substantial gifts during the original capital campaign, but had not continued that level of funding during the first five years of operation. The presentation included full-color graphic designs of the innovative techniques that would be used in the exhibition as well as a description of audio/video elements that would enhance the space and make the museum itself much more interactive and environmentally friendly. The *Invisible: Slavery Today* exhibition was a way of reengaging these already generous donors on a significant level that would not have otherwise occurred.

The Impact of *Invisible: Slavery Today*

Despite a major economic downturn, two factors appear to have allowed the Freedom Center to create an extremely successful permanent exhibition: the decision of the Center to redouble efforts to cultivate current donor relationships and a deeper internal analysis and more focused application of institutional

finances. *Invisible: Slavery Today* has increased the Freedom Center's national media exposure and brought high-profile visitors such as Ashton Kutcher, Demi Moore, Nancy Pelosi and His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama to Cincinnati, Ohio. There has also been an increase in awareness by national funders and partners such as Lexis-Nexis, the Business Coalition Against Human Trafficking, and the U.S. Department of State. Finally, the Freedom Center has deepened its ties to numerous not-for-profit organizations fighting contemporary slavery around the world. Examples include the exhibition's partners Free the Slaves, Polaris Project, GoodWeave, and International Justice Mission. The increased focus on innovative exhibition creation, internal financial decisions, and external donor relations will ultimately continue to drive the Freedom Center forward during both economic hardship and success. This experience is proof that a little innovation and a lot of determination can accomplish amazing outcomes in the face of adversity. ✨