Letter from the Director

by Daniel Carey-Whalen, Director

Since May was Mental Health Month and June is Alzheimer’s & Brain Awareness Month, the Centennial Museum staff decided to cover mental health in this newsletter. As someone who suffers from Anxiety/Depression, I am deeply aware of the toll that coronavirus is having on our lives. According to the American Psychiatric Association, over 60% of Americans reported an increase in stress and anxiety since the pandemic began.

Overall, I have remained healthy because of my diet, gardening, listening to music, and practicing yoga. Gardening has been my “go-to” activity since the beginning of the quarantine, keeping me both mentally and physically fit.

Yet, as El Paso’s heat rises, I spend less time outdoors and more time listening to music. Music soothes the soul and I have been both expanding my listening repertoire and listening to some “classics.” One of these classics is Pink Floyd’s 1973 rock opera, Dark Side of the Moon, which ends with the song couplet, Brain Damage/Eclipse. These songs, based on Roger Water’s life experiences dealing with his bandmate, Syd Barrett’s mental illness, talked about one’s mental health in the midst of social and cultural upheaval. For me, they are a reminder of our own mental fragility.

My last “happy place” is yoga. I have been practicing yoga for over two decades and I find it a welcome release for stress. For the past three years, the Centennial Museum has hosted the Faculty and Staff Yoga Class and we are currently practicing Zoom yoga! This class is part of the University of Texas System’s Living Well. UTEP’s participation in these programs helps ensure the mental and physical health of their employees. You may be aware of some of the other programs.
offered to us as employees, including free flu shots and the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). If you are faculty or staff, please check out what the Wellness Program has to offer.

In addition, for those who do not work at UTEP, the Paso del Norte Health Foundation has created a resource center to help El Pasoans cope with all types of health related issues.

Whatever your outlet is, we hope that you can find your “happy place.”

Stay safe and be well,

Daniel Carey-Whalen

Congratulations! Congratulations to our very talented designer, Amy Briones, for winning the Texas Association of Museums’ Wilder Publication Design Award for her poster design for the exhibition, Uncaged Art: Tornillo Children's Detention Camp.
Lhakhang
Mementos: Bringing Awareness of Alzheimer’s and Brain Awareness Month
Claudia Ley, Education Curator

Now more than ever it is important for us to be aware of our mental health along with the mental health of the elderly. June is Alzheimer’s and brain awareness month. The Alzheimer’s Association West Texas Chapter brings awareness to this disorder every day of the year. They understand the various impacts and effects that this illness has on the everyday lives of those individuals who live with it, as well as the lives of the families and care partners who are also affected by this disorder; education and support end up being the most important tools for this organization.

*Mementos* was started a year ago along with the Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts as a program geared for individuals with early-stage dementia, their care partners, and their families. The program takes place in a museum or cultural institution versus a hospital or clinical setting. Through a combination of approaches/treatment patterns/subjects/different methods- art, history, nature, reflective, conversation, mindful looking, and meditation- educators, guest artists, and docents alongside participants are able to make connections and spark memories that might have been forgotten. As studies have shown, museums-of any kind- and gardens end up being of great benefit to those affected by various brain disorders because they offer a therapeutic component to them. As I’ve personally witnessed, sometimes it is just a simple stroll through a museum or garden that ends up creating a spark and the individual can suddenly reminisce on a childhood
memory. As noted in a study done by the Fischer Center for Alzheimer’s Research Foundation, “Care partners of those who attend the museum tours notice that their loved ones with Alzheimer’s become more alert, emotionally charged, and talkative after a museum visit.”

Most recently, Sarah Yvonne Jimenez, an instructor in clinical nursing, and Elvira Carrizal-Dukes, an assistant professor in the Chicano Studies program, created a virtual four-part art and writing therapy workshop, “Journal Writing and Doodles for Stress Reduction and Relaxation”, specially geared for family members and caretakers being affected by the illness. Elvira, alongside her husband, comic book artist and publisher Ronnie Dukes, leads the writing and doodling prompts, while Sarah discusses the mental and emotional benefits of the aforementioned prompts and similar activities. There is still time to take part in these workshops taking place on June 4 and June 18, no experience is required but registration is encouraged through the chapter at 915-497-9930 or WestTexas@alz.org.

During these times when it feels most crucial for us to take time to acknowledge our mental health and that of our loved ones, we should consider taking on a mindfulness approach while utilizing the arts, writing, and conversation with family members, partners and friends as a form of therapy. While we at the Centennial Museum and Chihuahuan Desert Gardens and the Lhakhang can only hope to be open sooner than later, we encourage you to continue visiting our website, along with following our social media for more information and similar programming to come.

For more information about Mindful Bridges and the Alzheimer’s Association West Texas Chapter please call or visit 915-497-9930 or WestTexas@alz.org.

Please visit the website DukesComics or follow them on Facebook at DUKESComics.com and Instagram at dukescomics_publisher
**Nerd Nights**

by Sam Winer, Curator

Growing up in El Paso, I have fond memories of going to the Insights Science Center on field trips. I remembered the pendulum swings, powering up a city by riding a bicycle, and seeing mummies from a traveling exhibit on Ancient Egypt. When I returned to El Paso as an adult, I was saddened to hear that the physical building was no more. But in the fall of 2017, when Insights reached out to the Centennial Museum about a joint program, I was excited to learn that Insights was flourishing as a mobile museum. The program they suggested was Nerd Nights, which would be a monthly series of talks focusing on a different STEAM (science, technology, education, art, and math) subjects that would be located in different venues across El Paso. The first talk was a subject close to my heart: beer. I was instantly sold! Titled “Hop Chemistry”, featuring Dr. Stephen Taylor, professor of Brewing Chemistry at NMSU, and Carlos Guzman, head brewer of El Paso Brewing, to demystify the science behind beer. The first time you put on an event there is always hesitation and fear; will it work out or not? Fortunately, it did work! At our first Nerd Night at El Paso Brewing, almost 100 people showed up. The brewery was at capacity and we realized Nerd Night would be a success.

Topics are varied and rich, from “Open Archives”, to “Prehistoric Tracking”, and the “Future of Computing”. I have been fortunate enough to give several talks for Nerd Night. My favorite was “The Spirit of Tequila”. I gave a presentation on the history and mythology behind tequila. For example, did you know that one of the reasons why tequila became popular was because in 1595 the King of Spain outlawed the production of native grown wines in New Spain, causing colonists to look locally for an inexpensive alcoholic fix? One of the reasons I went into the museum field was to see people's
excitement when they realize history is not just dates and facts, but instead full of stories of people who are just like them. That is what makes Nerd Night great; it makes learning fun and accessible in an informal environment.

Even during the chaotic times of COVID-19, Nerd Night still remains strong. Last month we held our first virtual Nerd Night on the science of laughter. With over fifty Nerds participating we were able to learn why during these difficult times laughter is so important. Nerd Night fills a gap in El Paso. It gathers Nerds from around the city to bond over all things esoteric and weird. For far too long, being a nerd has been an insult, but at Nerd Night we embrace that term and we have created our own community of proud Nerds.

I hope I have encouraged you all to embrace your inner nerd and continue learning about the world around you. As mentioned earlier, Nerd Nights are held once a month at different places around the city and are currently held online. Please feel free to follow the Centennial Museum on social media or visit our website for more information! I invite you to come join us!
Before I became the Director of the Centennial Museum and Chihuahuan Desert Gardens, I coordinated the Museum Studies Minor at UTEP and taught most of the courses. In the Spring of 2015, my students had the opportunity to work with the Centennial Museum and the Women and Gender Studies Program on the amazing exhibit, Engendering Community. This exhibit, based on an oral history project, celebrated the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) communities in El Paso and Juarez. It was an incredible experience, as we helped create an exhibit that honored the history and diversity of the Borderland's LGBTQ community, while recognizing the efforts to ensure "unity" in this community.

Since June is also Pride Month, we are remembering the 5th Anniversary of the Engendering Community exhibit in our Exhibit Archive. Enjoy!
Chihuahuan Desert Gardens
Notes for June 2020 by Kevin Floyd, Botanical Curator

June can be a challenging month for gardens. It is often our hottest month, with little rain until the monsoon begins. However, many of our native plants are still flowering through this heat, such as skeleton-leaf goldeneye (Viguiera stenoloba) and desert willow (Chilopsis linearis). These flowers are part of a fascinating partnership between flowering plants and animals known as pollinators. June 22-28 is National Pollinator Week, a time to celebrate pollinators and learn about how to protect them.

Pollination is the transfer of pollen either within a flower or from one flower to another, leading to fertilization and the production of seeds. Around 75% of all flowering plants need the help of an animal to move their pollen. Most people think of honey bees when they hear about pollination, but bees are just one example. Other animal pollinators include butterflies, moths, flies, wasps, beetles, birds, bats, and even some lizards. However, bees are generally considered to be the most efficient pollinator, and are one of the few groups that actually gathers the pollen to use as food. Bees mix pollen and nectar to make a pollen loaf in their nest, which is the food source for their larvae. We are fortunate to live in one of the most biodiverse locations for native bees in the entire world. There are around 4000 species of native bees in the U.S., and probably 100s of species in the Chihuahuan Desert. We do not know much about the native bees in El Paso, which is one of the reasons that I have been working with students to survey bees since 2018, mostly at UTEP. These surveys will help create a baseline understanding of the bee community, and allow us to monitor for changes in population sizes.

Many pollinators are experiencing population declines. Most of us have seen disturbing reports about huge decreases in monarch butterflies and honey bee colony collapses, but less is known about the status of native bees. We do know that habitat loss due to urbanization and agriculture, pesticides,
and climate change are all stresses on pollinator populations. Fortunately, there is also a growing body of evidence that small actions can help support pollinators, even in cities. There are three categories: provide abundant food, provide places to nest and overwinter, and avoid pesticides as much as possible.

Providing abundant food for native pollinators means planting a variety of species, mostly natives, that together flower from early spring through fall. Plants like **Mexican redbud** (*Cercis canadensis* var. *mexicana*) and **agarito** (*Mahonia trifoliolata*) are some of the first to flower, and **turpentine bush** (*Ericameria laricifolia*) and **Wright’s buckwheat** (*Eriogonum wrightii*) are visited by bees in the fall, as late as November in El Paso. One challenge for gardeners is providing food for butterflies and moths. Who doesn’t want to see the yellows and oranges of butterflies flitting about in their yard? But although the adults are happy drinking nectar, their babies, known as caterpillars, need to eat lots of leaves. The first response of many gardeners is to kill any caterpillars they encounter, but doing so will cause the butterfly and moth populations to decline. Perhaps some plants can be sacrificed to allow for the next generation of butterflies to survive?

Most people focus on plants in pollinator gardens, but providing nesting and overwintering sites is also important. Around 70% of native bees nest in the ground, with the rest nesting in wood. Covering all of the soil in your yard with mulch certainly helps with water conservation, but deprives many nesting bees a place to dig their tunnels and lay their eggs. Try to find a place where you can leave some bare dirt undisturbed. The wood-nesting bees overwinter as larvae in dead branches and stems, emerging the following year to complete their life cycle. You might...
be throwing away baby bees when cutting back your plants each spring. Maybe there is a corner of the yard where you can leave the stems, and allow bees to safely emerge. Many insects overwinter in leaf litter, so avoid raking up part or all of your yard in the fall and winter. A messy yard is a wildlife-friendly yard! Other pollinators like butterflies and hummingbirds need shelter too, so try to include a variety of plant forms like trees, shrubs, and grasses.

Finally, avoid pesticide use as much as possible. A messy yard with diverse plants will often attract beneficial insects and birds that will help keep pests under control. Physical barriers like row covers can keep your veggies safe, and a strong stream of water can knock off many pests. If you do determine that chemical controls are required, follow the label to minimize harm to non-target species like bees. The El Paso Master Gardeners, are a great resource in both pest identification and control options.

I will discuss more about pollinators in future newsletters, and can focus on the various pollinator groups, more plant recommendations, and other conservation actions. Is there something about pollinators you would like to learn more about? Let me know! Watching pollinators in the Chihuahuan Desert Gardens always brings a smile to my face, and I hope seeing pollinators in your yard does the same for you.

Kevin Floyd, Ph.D., Botanical Curator