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**COLLABORATOR: Laura Callen, Founder/Director,  
Adoption Museum Project**

**AUTHOR: Barbara Mumby, CAM Fellow**



Our world is in a constant state of flux, giving rise to a myriad of complex social issues. Museums are not immune to these changes and are faced with the dilemma of how to make an impact in such a complicated society. How do some institutions evolve from being a steward of antiquities to a catalyst for social change? The Adoption Museum Project is fiercely tackling this issue of social change by engaging visitors in dynamic and meaningful conversations around the multifaceted topic of adoption: issues that encompass ethnicity, culture, and religion, to name a few. Highlighting some of the Adoption Museum Projects exhibitions, this case study will look at how one museum is striving to become a vehicle for social change.

The story of adoption touches the lives of over 60% of the U.S. population. Because the U.S. adopts more children from other countries than any other nation, how we practice adoption has a profound impact on families around the world. Adoption transcends ethnicity, race, culture, religion, gender identity and socio-economic status while touching upon social issues such as racism, civil rights, immigration, and reproductive justice. The Adoption Museum Project strives to explore these important stories in a public space, using multiple forms of expression. The very concept helps to change the way we consider some museums: not as repositories, but as forums for pressing social issues.

Founder and Director, Laura Callen, did not set out to start a museum. She began with a problem she saw in adoption: the lack of an inclusive, ongoing, public conversation that could build deeper understanding. The negative consequences range from stigma and stereotypes to disrupted adoptions and suicide. The positive outcomes of adoption need to be understood as well. “The more I looked at the adoption world, the museum world, other fields and disciplines such as social change and social entrepreneurship, and other change movements such as reproductive justice and GLBT rights, I believed that museum space could become part of the solution in adoption,” Callen explained. She never assumed “that creating a museum about adoption was inherently justified because no museum on this topic exists.” It would have to demonstrate value and impact. To do this, the museum intends to explore adoption’s history, practice and policy, lived experiences and connection to other social issues.

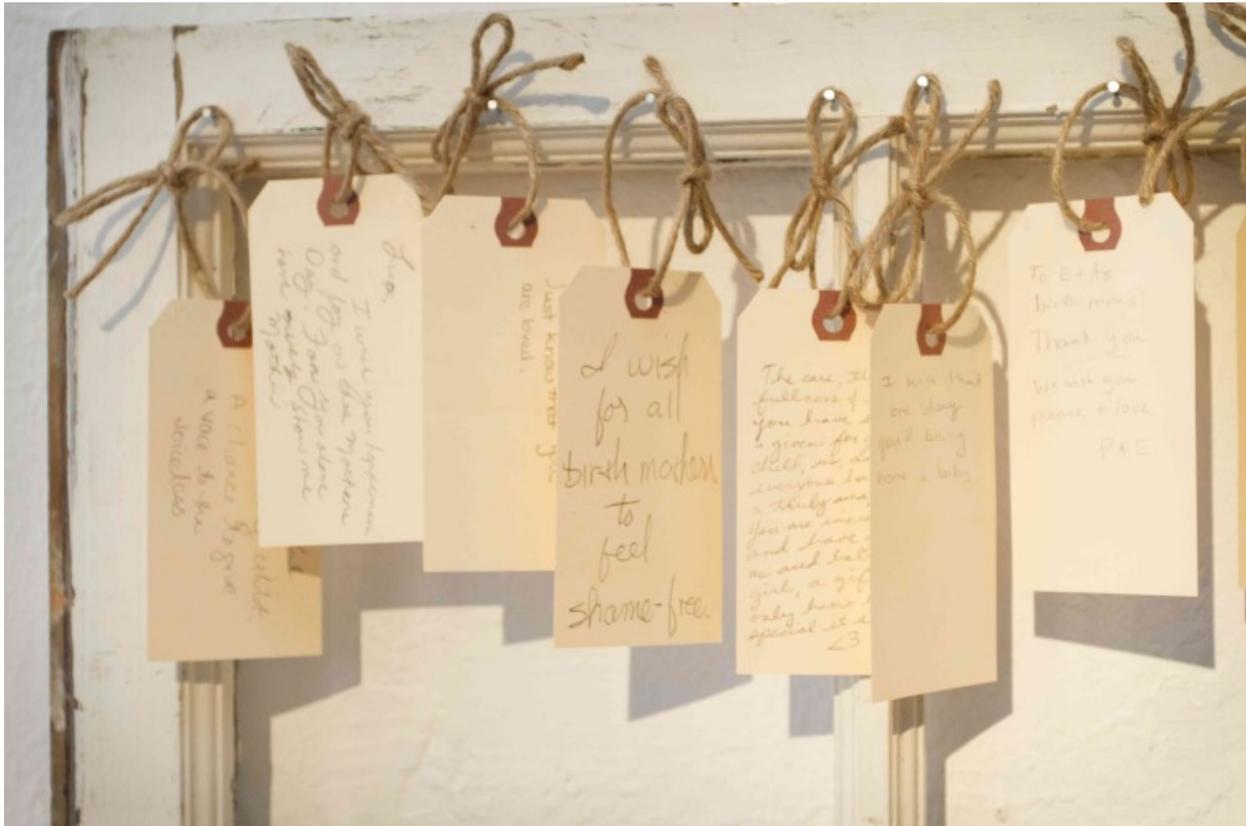


## Session 7A: Controversial Conversations: Engaging Visitors in Issues that Matter

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*(Photos by Indira Urrutia and Marc Hors.)*

Founded in January of 2013, the Adoption Museum Project began by developing smaller, collaborative projects that support its mission to “catalyze conversations about adoption that support positive social change.” Its first exhibition, “Our Place at the Table: Honoring Birth Mother Stories,” explored the experiences of birth/first mothers. Collaborating with 18 birth mothers and the On Your Feet Foundation, the Adoption Museum Project created a space at the Red Poppy Art House in San Francisco where birth mothers could safely share their personal stories with each other and the public. Consisting of personal objects arranged around a dining table, each place setting told a story and provided insight into the experience of first/birth mothers. There was also an opportunity provided for guests to contribute a message to honor these mothers.



*(Photos by Indira Urrutia and Marc Hors.)*

Two other projects are currently in development. The first is a program that will debut at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles, featuring an original shadow puppet show for children based upon a book entitled “The Mulberry Bird,” and a nest-making art project. The program will run November 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014 during Adoption Awareness month.

The second is a co-curated project with the Presidio Trust in San Francisco that looks at the diverse group of people involved with Operation Babylift at the Presidio in April 1975.

The stories that emerge from Operation Babylift are endless. We could surmise that adoptions intertwined with military actions are fraught with controversy and



complexities, particularly those related to the Vietnam War. Few could forget the powerful images of Vietnamese babies in boxes being flown to the US to be adopted. Many believe that the US’s evacuation of these children was an essential humanitarian mission that benefitted many people. Others are adamant that these actions were immoral and illegal and emerged from war propaganda to stimulate more

government funding. And some think that the reality lies somewhere in between.

After four decades, the memories of Operation Babylift have begun to fade for many. For others, these memories are personal stories that tell a tale of sacrifice, still vivid in their minds. The issues that emerge continue to be relevant today, such as cultural identity, race, rescue, and immigration, to name just a few.

The project includes an exhibition and a calendar of public programs. It will open in April, 2015 to coincide with the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Operation Babylift, and run through September 2015. A new, temporary gallery in the Presidio Officer's Club, designed to host contemporary conversations related to the Presidio's history, will be the venue for the project.

The dialogue poignantly begins at the very spot where many of these children's lives made a pivotal change. The exhibit will focus on the experiences at the Presidio during Operation Babylift and tell a story that has never been told before in this format. By exploring contemporary themes related to this unprecedented U.S. government action, the Adoption Museum Project's intent is to powerfully link these historical experiences with modern issues.

Committed to engaging the community, the Adoption Museum Project and the Presidio Trust will ask community advisors to help shape the project from the very beginning – from the concept stage. This diverse group will provide direct input to both the exhibition and public programming. They represent multiple points of view, including the many people who were directly involved in and affected by Operation Babylift it, as well as the larger Vietnamese adoptee and Vietnamese American communities.

The Adoption Museum Project's mission is to catalyze conversations about adoption that support positive social change. Working to meaningfully engage visitors in dynamic conversations, the Adoption Museum Project is poised to support a shift in how society views all of the issues that encompass adoption as well as challenge the way we view museums. By exploring the complexity of stories like Operation Babylift, we can begin to look at adoption in a more complete and humane way. When we talk about the people who were adopted, for example, we can come to know them as whole individuals who have grown up and have their own, full lives, rather than imagining them forever as helpless babies in boxes. Through these acknowledgements, the Adoption Museum Project will be closer to realizing their desire to become a vehicle for social change.

### About the Author / CAM Fellow



**Barbara Mumby** has worked in the arts and education field for the past fifteen years, focusing on supporting marginalized, ethnically diverse, and low socio-economic communities. Barbara obtained her undergraduate degrees in Native American Studies and Studio Arts from the University of California, Berkeley. Currently, she is a graduate student at John F Kennedy University, working towards her MA in Museum Studies and an MBA in Business Administration. In addition, she is the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) intern at the Oakland Museum of California working on developing culturally appropriate practices pertaining to web-based Native American collections.

**Abstract:**

**The Adoption Museum Project: The Museum as a Vehicle for Social Change**

The story of adoption touches the lives of over 60% of the U.S. population: transcending ethnicity, race, culture, religion, gender identity and socio-economic status while touching upon social issues such as racism, civil rights, immigration, and reproductive justice. Founded in 2013 by Laura Callen, the Adoption Museum Project strives to explore these social issues and the personal stories of adoption in a public space by using multiple forms of expression. With a mission to catalyze conversations about adoption that supports positive social change, the Adoption Museum Project is poised to support a shift in how society views all of the issues that encompass adoption as well as challenge the way we consider museums.