

Advocacy is Easy! Inviting Elected Officials to Your Museum

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On August 16, the Quaker Heritage Center of Wilmington College welcomed Representative Steve Stivers to our museum. I was prompted to invite Representative Stivers to visit us by the American Alliance of Museums' (AAM) #InviteCongress advocacy program. AAM provides helpful step-by-step tips for inviting Congressional staff to your site, everything from a sample invitation letter to recommendations about following up on the invitation to suggestions of how to structure the visit. While AAM's focus was on politicians at the federal level, I wanted to invite members of the Ohio legislature, our County Commissioners, the Mayor, and all the members of our City Council as well. I was pleasantly surprised to confirm visits from not only Representative Stivers, but Ohio Speaker of the House Cliff Rosenberger as well. Once the visits were confirmed, I started to get nervous. What was I thinking? What could I do to make these visits worth their time?

I began by putting together a list of the Center's programs and events, focusing on how they impact the community. Then I drafted a loose museum tour that would pull together the exhibits and objects on display with those programs and events. I also made sure that I had someone else who could be there to take photos and made plans with other staff and volunteers to be present for parts of the tour. When the big day came, I was still nervous, but confident that I had sketched out 45 minutes that would show off the Center and would communicate the Center's value to the community.

Two of the Center's student staff were able to participate in the tour – Jayme Mabry, a sophomore who handles our museum collection processing and exhibit-related special event planning, and Megan Canfield, a senior working with the Center's QHC + I AM Campaign partnership. They impressed Representative Stivers with

their passion for their work with the Center, their involvement with the campus community, and their post-graduation plans. Representative Stivers particularly appreciated the fact that the Center is not only taking responsibility for caring for our region's history, but also taking an active role in the future by providing practical job experience for young professionals and tackling current social justice issues.

Just the day before Representative Stivers visited, the Center received a collection donation from a local Quaker family, so he was able to see a wide assortment of the types of items that the Center cares for – textiles, personal goods, furniture, even a football used by a Wilmington College alumnus when he was a student here. Representative Stivers was also interested in seeing our collection storage space, and was impressed by the size and scope of the collection. He recognized the financial burden of caring for the collection, which was a perfect opening to show him our collection of propaganda posters from the Marshall Plan following World War II, and to tell him about our fundraising campaign for their framing. He loved the fact that we'll be doing a major exhibit of the posters in Summer 2017, and that they will be available as a traveling exhibit after that...we may even get one of them into his office in Washington DC!

For those of you who are thinking that this seems like a lot of work and a lot of time for no tangible immediate reward, I offer this recent development: I received an email from Representative Stivers' District Director, sharing information he had received from Ohio Humanities about projects funded in our district. He closed the email with this note: "Let me know if I can help with any info on these or make any connections with their staff... Would love to see some 15th congressional district projects on the below list."



Franklinton Preparatory Academy students and principal at the Franklinton community's celebration of the wood buffalo.

Photo courtesy of the Franklinton Historical Society.

We've built a relationship with Representative Stivers and his staff! They are thinking of us! They are offering help! That's worth all the time and effort!

For those of you who are ready to plan your own visit, let me offer a few words of advice. First, **be flexible**. You need to be willing to work with their schedule. You may think your calendar looks crazy, but they have even less available time than you do, so make your schedule work to fit theirs. Second, **be ready to answer their questions**. You never know what is going to catch someone's interest or spark someone's imagination. Be ready to go places within your museum and talk about things you hadn't planned on including. Third, **say thank you!** Part of the reason Representative Stivers enjoyed his visit so much is that I wasn't asking him for anything. This visit was all about engaging with him, not about making a request, and thanking him for his time and for all he has done for our community was a huge part of that. And finally, **contact your regional representatives and advocacy committee**. Did you know that the Ohio Local History Alliance has a committee created just to help you advocate for your museum or site? They have great resources and would love to help you plan a visit. Good luck! ■