

The National Medal for Museum and Library services is the nation's highest honor for libraries and museums that are serving their communities in exciting ways. Madison Children's Museum director Ruth Shelly and community member Benjamin Perreth traveled to Washington to receive the national medal and spoke to IMLS about how the museum impacts the community.

Ruth Shelly: Madison Children's museum I think is unique in its intensely only local focus. We use only local people, only local products and processes that involve the local community. Madison, Dane County, and the State of Wisconsin is growing in its diversity. The University of Wisconsin is there and so we have many different cultures coming to the university. It's the state capital and so we have many different people coming to use the city as for government but I see an increasing diversity not just cultural diversity but also in people with differing abilities in age, and we realize that as a museum we wanted to be as inclusive as possible. Well like any non-profit, we're working on a shoestring budget and so volunteers are the backbone of our organization. We really rely on them to help us deliver high quality visitor service, to work behind the scenes, but in addition volunteers give our museum that unique community character, because it's the people of the community who built the museum and then when they're part of it as a volunteer they feel even more invested. And we work particularly with people with special abilities like Ben who find a home in the museum because it's a welcoming easy place to be.

Benjamin Perreth: I struggle with mental illness and physical illnesses too. Right before I joined the volunteering staff at the children museum, Madison Children museum. I was in a low point of my life and I had no hope, but the Madison children museum has rewritten my fate. When I am there my bosses assign me to be on the floor and I am like the mother bear always watching for a kid is lost or like if they lost their toy I pick up and I go straight to the front desk where the lost and found is. And also I am walking around always and just giving influence to the kids like, "Good job," or "You climbed up can you can climb across?" The imagination of the kids is infinite, and I just love watching them grow and learn and at the children museum it's like a dream, a lovely dream never ending.

Ruth Shelly: Ben speaks so eloquently about the difference Madison Children's museum has made in his life but the reverse is true because his presence has really influenced us as well. And so we have plans for Ben in terms of helping us as we become a museum even more attuned to people with special needs because Ben can advice us in terms of how we can be more accessible, more inclusive and more welcoming to people from all abilities. When people walk in to our museum we want them to see themselves in the employees that surround them. And so Ben is a wonderful example of someone with special gifts and special challenges who is working very successfully on the floor. And so when children with special needs come in its like wow they employ people like me and I have this hope to be able to be employed in the future but its not just special needs it's people from all different economic backgrounds, cultural backgrounds we're so committed to having our staff reflect the people we serve because that's what being about the community entails.