



Capital District Employees Exemplify Docent Training

by Peter T. Larsen and Ben Fenkell

Do you know the difference between a volunteer and a docent?

Both volunteers and docents play important roles in California's State Parks. They serve in almost all of California's state parks and lend invaluable assistance to staff.

One of the many volunteer opportunities is that of a docent. Docents are highly trained volunteers who interpret for visitors the cultural, natural and recreational resources of state parks.

You may ask "How do docents become highly trained?" Staff of the Capital District can answer that question. "We perform extensive volunteer training at all of our museums and historic parks" says Cathy Taylor, Capital District Superintendent.

More than 1,300 well trained volunteers, many of whom are docents, interpret the museums and historic parks to more than 1.3 million Capital District visitors each year. In 2007 the Capital District volunteers worked 169,573 hours, managed by 58 staff.

Capital District volunteer training programs have undergone many improvements and are striving to stay current not only in subject, but also in technology. Gone are the days of slide presentations and mass amounts of handouts. PowerPoint presentations and CDs have taken their places. Volunteer applications are available online as well as training schedules.

Volunteer training programs ensure docents receive a wealth of information on history, customer service, and basic interpretation prior to working with the public. Because of these great training programs, the Capital District has been able to recruit large numbers of volunteers and retain them for many years.

The California State Railroad Museum offers three different volunteer training classes throughout the year. Volunteers are taught a variety of subjects such as 19th century railroads, the basics of interpretation, customer service, and themes. "Often people who seek to be a docent here at the Museum bring with them a strong background and knowledge of railroads and California history. Every volunteer has the desire to learn and share with every visitor who walks through our front doors." says, Theresa Gonsolis, California State Railroad Museum Training Coordinator.



The California State Railroad Museum volunteers receive hands-on training in the Railyards.

At the California State Capitol Museum, Volunteer Coordinator Berndt Stolfi provides a great example of how to train volunteers. Berndt says, "It's not enough to simply train volunteers then send them to their assignments. At the State Capitol Museum we constantly engage volunteers with fieldtrips to other State Parks and local museums, providing fresh opportunities to see the State Capitol in new ways."



Berndt Stolfi takes the State Capitol Museum volunteers on a field trip inside the Senate Chambers.

After a California State Capitol docent is hired they receive 36 hours of historical and interpretive training and an additional 24 hours of mentoring. After graduating from docent training they have opportunities to attend monthly training classes to further improve their State Capitol knowledge.

Docents are encouraged to research topics on their own and add their unique approach and experiences to sharing that information. One example is Clem Dougherty. Clem designed a California Governor's tour and a theme paper with specific details about some of California's Governors. Clem takes tour groups through the Capitol stopping at Governors portraits and interpreting the Governor's lives. Other docents were so enthused about Clem's tour that he began training them to give the tour.



State Capitol Museum Interpreter Mindy Orosco, Park Aide Peter Larsen and Museum Director Terese Zilke train new volunteers.

As we read in the 2007 Volunteer Annual Report, "Volunteers are vital to the effective operation of California State Parks – and their commitment to helping meet the department's mission is truly extraordinary. In calendar year 2007, a total of 15,411 dedicated individuals provided 984,538 hours of service, representing an equivalent dollar value to State Parks of over \$19 million."

One of the benefits of working at California State Parks is that we can ensure our volunteers are well trained. I encourage you to seek ways to develop and further improve your volunteer training programs. If you have any questions about the Capital District volunteer training programs please contact: Peter Larsen, plarsen@parks.ca.gov

If you want to learn more about the Capital District Museums and their volunteer programs please visit: <http://www.parks.ca.gov/capitaldistrict>