Why the International Slavery Museum (ISM) and Journey to Justice (JtoJ)

ISM highlights the international importance of enslavement and slavery, both in a historic and modern context. Working in partnership with other organisations with a focus on freedom and enslavement, the Museum also provides opportunities for greater awareness and understanding of the legacies of slavery today. JtoJ aims to galvanise people to take action for social justice through learning about human rights movements and the arts. Therefore, naturally, when the opportunity arose for us to include JtoJ in ISM’s temporary exhibition programme it was a perfect match.

This article will outline the approach of the recent partnership between ISM and JtoJ.

About the International Slavery Museum

The International Slavery Museum, part of National Museums Liverpool, opened in August 2007. It is situated on the third floor of the Merseyside Maritime Museum at the Royal Albert Dock in Liverpool. It is the only national museum in the world to cover the transatlantic slave trade and its legacies as well as contemporary forms of slavery and enslavement. It is also an international hub for resources on human rights issues and campaigning.

Background to Journey to Justice

Journey to Justice is a volunteer led human rights education charity aiming to motivate and support people to become active in social justice movements by learning from past and present human rights struggles. Its main project is a touring exhibition with the same name focused on the United States civil rights movement and its music which tells the extraordinary story of some of the less well-known women, men and children involved, also highlighting some of the many struggles for freedom in the UK.

JtoJ - the exhibition

The touring exhibition’s content explores how the United States civil rights movement helped to move people both in the UK and internationally to fight for their rights, challenge inequality and campaign for cultural and political transformation. The exhibition narrative is based around seven key individuals: Ruby Bridges, the first black child to take her place at an all-white elementary school in the southern states, Elmore and Peggy Nickleberry, who campaigned for the rights of sanitation workers in Memphis with Martin Luther King as well as Janice Wesley, who at sixteen protested in the Birmingham Children’s Crusade. Bayard Rustin, who organised the 1963 March on Washington and much much more, Jean Stallings, a black single mother who was part of the National Welfare Rights Organisation and Marcia Saunders Heinemann, who supported black voters registering to vote in Tennessee in addition to the Greensboro Four, famous for their sit-in at a ‘whites-only’ lunch counter in Woolworth’s, North Carolina.
A central component of the touring exhibition and a key requirement of the partnership is the development of a local strand unique to each venue. So far, this has taken various forms ranging from oral histories and interviews with local activists to creative responses and workshops.

**JtoJ Liverpool**

Our curatorial and education teams were inspired by the key messages of courage, solidarity and activism included in the touring exhibition as well as the individual stories told and the examination of what leads people to become and stay active in campaigns and what makes a human rights movement succeed.

The exhibition’s local strand shows how ‘people like us’ can become extraordinary in the quest for social justice today. It looks at how to become campaigners ourselves, focusing on Liverpool’s community and the city’s DIY, roots up culture of self-activism.

Key messages and individuals featured in the exhibition link directly to ISM’s education programming and content from the Sankofa project*. These include artworks from a collaborative project developed with Liverpool John Moores University and DIY zines commissioned by our ISM education team that are on display alongside the touring JtoJ exhibition.

**In more detail, Stef Bradley, ISM Education Manager explains:** We chose to showcase content created by community partners around themes of social justice and activism that would complement the content of JtoJ, including student artwork from ‘Of Rights and Resistance’, a collaborative project with Liverpool John Moores University that invited Graphic Design and Illustration students and staff to respond to ISM’s legacies of slavery collections.

This initial project involved students undertaking a bespoke tour, handling session and Q&A with ISM curators to explore legacies of slavery. The students were then invited to create responses to these collections that we exhibited in the Dr Martin Luther King Jr building. We opened this display on the anniversary of Dr Martin Luther King’s assassination and two prizewinning artworks from artists Max Palmer and Kirsty Buckley were then chosen to be showcased as part of the Journey to Justice exhibition, along with interviews with the students and their tutor, Chris Jackson, to contextualise the project.

We also included oral history testimonies and visual minutes from the Sankofa project. We chose to focus on content that one of our Young Ambassadors* had been instrumental in creating through interviewing female activists in Liverpool, as part of Vote100 and creating the Sankofa Seeds of Change zine. This zine highlights the work of five activist women in Liverpool who are making a change today. With this link to zines it felt very fitting to invite Over Here Zine Fest to curate a library of zines showcasing the work of BAME artists and writers working within small press and also highlight the work that Over Here Zine Fest are doing in the UK to create a platform for BAME creatives through their Manchester based zine fair. Zines have historically been used by activists: from UK feminists’ self-publishing to the Black Panther Party, who created their own paper The Black Panther (of which we have a number of copies in our museum collections).
The partnership and how we worked differently

As Journey to Justice’s Director Carrie Supple puts it: ‘This is our eleventh venue, we’ve been in art centres, a cathedral, a library and other museums but none with the same requirements as ISM. At first we were a bit daunted by having to deal with a more formal system than usual and we were worried it wouldn’t seem like a proper partnership.’

As a large organisation with multiple departments working across our eight venues and a workforce in its hundreds we are mindful that our partners may not necessarily understand our structures straightaway; neither are we always able to work with a direct counterpart.

So, what did we do differently? And how did we work with JtoJ to address their initial concerns to demonstrate the benefits of working with an organisation like ourselves? Explaining the remit of each department and talking through our processes and the main deadlines together, as well as highlighting the key benefits of a larger organisation - such as visitor footfall, museum profile, staff resources - helped alleviate concerns.

We were quite a different partner for JtoJ as we already had an exhibition venue, a project team and a dedicated budget. We therefore did not form a local volunteer steering group to drive the fundraising and delivery of the project and curate/programme the additional local strand of the exhibition. The project team consisted of colleagues in Exhibitions, Design, Curatorial, Education, Marketing, Press, Web and Information Systems Departments who met regularly over a seven month period. Our curatorial and education teams took the lead on developing the local content and education programme and although we didn’t have a volunteer steering group we still wanted to work with community partners to shape the local stories. All of this was in discussion with the JtoJ team to involve them in our process.

It therefore goes without saying that good communication between ourselves and JtoJ was paramount. So important in fact, that we stipulated in the formal partnership agreement that regular telephone discussions between main contacts would be scheduled throughout the planning and delivery of the exhibition. Which leads me to the other point I’d like to make about making sure a comprehensive partnership agreement is drawn up detailing roles and responsibilities, financial obligations, copyright and ownership, marketing and publicity, the list can go on. We used the Partnership Agreement Resource and Template available from TEG to develop this which is an excellent resource to ensure clarity and make sure there are no ‘grey areas’ that could be misinterpreted.

As with most partnerships there were a number of compromises during the process. By outlining our priorities we were able to understand what was most important to each partner and the reasons for this, along with what we were prepared to negotiate on in order to achieve these outcomes.

In our case the local section was key to link the wider themes of the touring exhibition to our museum and audiences. As a result we made sure we put sufficient resources towards developing a meaningful local section. At previous hosting venues JtoJ had ensured that local volunteers were on duty to welcome visitors, talk to them and ask for feedback. We are hosting the exhibition for a longer period than these venues so knew we would be unable to sustain this for the exhibition run. Instead we invited the JtoJ team to brief colleagues in our Visitor Services and Education teams who have face to face contact with visitors. We have also ensured that feedback is being captured by evaluation forms available on the gallery. Exhibition visitor figures are sent to the partner every month and an evaluation report will be completed at the end of the exhibition’s run and shared with the partner.

Lastly, another example of how we have been responsive to the partner’s needs is through the exhibition launch. This was a very important event for the JtoJ team in demonstrating the significance of the exhibition within our public offer and also connecting them with the wider team. We organised a daytime community launch, inviting community partners, volunteers, ISM Education contacts and participating artists as well as JtoJ stakeholders and team members.
Carrie Supple explains: ‘We were used to organising our launch, being involved with choosing which local stories to tell etc. But we soon found the team at ISM approachable and cooperative and are delighted with the outcome regarding how our exhibition looks, the local section they curated and the publicity. It was wonderful to be on Woman’s Hour, thanks to the Media department at ISM’.

In the current climate, the benefits of partnership working amongst museums and galleries will become increasingly important. Although not without its challenges, the process of working in partnership with JtoJ was greatly beneficial to the team and wider organisation.

As well as connecting with the wider JtoJ network, it has enabled us to build on the important themes of the exhibition, focus our programming and showcase the work we are doing with community partners, resulting in a responsive and current display.

ISM website: http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/
Journey to Justice closes on 7 April 2019
Journey to Justice: https://journeytojustice.org.uk/

* Sankofa project aims to progress our understanding of Liverpool’s Black history by bringing together stories and objects, and supporting people and communities to look after their unique and often hidden history. http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/collections/research/sankofa/index.aspx

* Young Ambassadors is an annual programme conceived and run by ISM Education team open by application to young people between 17-22 in order to gain a behind the scenes insight into roles within ISM, challenge legacies of slavery such as racism and inequality, get involved in artist-led workshops and programme and host museum events and activities.