

# ***DIME MUSEUMS AND SIDE SHOWS***

## Wisconsin State Curriculum Alignment:

Health F.4.3 – Describe and demonstrate ways to communicate care, consideration, and respect for themselves and others

Health F.4.4 – Describe and demonstrate attentive-listening skills to build and maintain healthy relationships

Social Studies E.4.9 – Explain how people learn about others who are different from themselves.

Before Houdini became famous, he performed his magic act for the “lowest rung” of the entertainment industry: circuses, medicine and burlesque shows, and dime museums. These were not seen as respectable forms of entertainment by the middle and upper classes, so they catered to the working classes. This meant that admission prices were fairly low, and in some cases so was the quality of the act.

Houdini spent a lot of time performing in dime museums. These were theater-museums that charged 10¢ admission. Early dime museums exhibited works of art and natural wonders, but by the 1880s, dime museums also relied on live shows to entertain the audiences. They created a circus-like atmosphere with what amounted to “side shows.” In other words, professional showmen like P.T. Barnum (of the Barnum and Bailey Circus) put people who had unusual talents or physical features on exhibit and charged admission for the public to see what they called “freaks and geeks.” Now, the term “freaks” is not seen as a kind or appropriate word to use, but in Houdini’s day, many people used this word when talking about a person that had a physical disability or abnormality. For example, a person born without arms, who used his or her feet to do the things others would usually do with hands, might be termed a “freak.” “Geeks,” another term seen as offensive today, described performers who did not have a physical disability but had an unusual talent – like a snake charmer. Today we know that it is offensive to single people with disabilities or unusual characteristics out as “human curiosities.” Just because someone is different from you does not make gawking at him or her right, and it certainly doesn’t mean that he or she is any less intelligent, sensitive, or talented than you may be.

We would say that to single someone out as a “freak” or “geek” and to put him or her on display is wrong, but there were some advantages for side show performers of Houdini’s era. First of all, side show performers (“freaks”) were often well-paid, better than the “geeks” or other dime museum variety performers like magicians, or singers and dancers. Working in a side show provided a job opportunity for people with disabilities at a time when there weren’t many jobs open for them. The pay helped them to support their families and even made some famous side show performers rich. One example is Tom Thumb, a man who had a medical condition known as dwarfism that prevented him from

growing more than 25” tall. With P.T. Barnum promoting him, Tom Thumb became an international star, rich and famous.

Houdini performed alongside side show performers in dime museums. He became close friends with many of them and came to appreciate the differing abilities that we all have. According to one author, “[Houdini] did enjoy knowing the freaks. They were the museum stars, capable of drawing large crowds and matching salaries. Harry worked with and befriended Count Orloff, the atrophied “Human Window Pane” (“You Can See His Heart Beat! You Can See His Blood Circulate!), who gave him a picture and autograph -- “To my friend Houdinis [sic].” He also got to know Unthan, the armless wonder who could play the violin with his toes, and Thardo, a beautiful woman who submitted herself to repeated rattlesnake bites . . . He corresponded and kept in touch and developed long term friendships with them.” (Silverman, p.11)

Since the time Houdini performed alongside side-show performers, people have learned a lot about being sensitive to people with disabilities or those who are different from themselves. With your class, hold a think-aloud discussion about what it means to be sensitive to other people and how we can be sensitive to people with disabilities or differences and treat them with respect. You may want to record your class’ responses on the board or overhead projector using a bubble diagram. When you have completed your brainstorming, look over the suggestions on “disability etiquette” given by the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association. These suggestions can help us all to be better friends.

- 1) Say “person with a disability” rather than “disabled person.” In this way you put the person first. If you know the specific disability, such as cerebral palsy, you can say “person with cerebral palsy.” If you’re not sure what words to use, just ask. Try not to use words that are outdated, like “handicapped” or “crippled.”
- 2) Ask Before You Help – Don’t assume that a person with a disability always needs help. Often times people with disabilities can get around just fine and they appreciate being treated like independent people. If it seems like someone needs help, ask him or her before helping. If he or she says yes, ask how you can help before acting.
- 3) Think Before You Speak – Always speak directly to a person with a disability. Don’t try to communicate with him or her through someone else, like a companion, aide, or sign language interpreter. Just talk to people with disabilities as you would with anybody else.
- 4) Don’t Make Assumptions – People with disabilities know best what they can and cannot do. Don’t make decisions for them about participating in activities. In other words, don’t automatically exclude a friend with a disability just because you think that he or she can’t participate in an activity due to his or her limitations. Let your friend judge for himself what he can and can’t do.
- 5) Wheelchair users are people, not equipment. Don’t lean over someone in a wheelchair to interact with someone else. Also, don’t ask a wheelchair user to hold your coat. He or she is not a coat rack. Finally, don’t push or touch a person’s wheelchair. It is part of his or her personal space. When speaking to a wheelchair user, grab your own chair and sit at his or her level.

- 6) When you approach someone who is blind, identify yourself before making physical contact. Tell him or her your name and role (like “Hi, it’s Joe, your classmate) if appropriate. You may help a person who is blind by offering to read written information to him or her.
- 7) People who are blind use their arms for balance, so offer your arm – don’t grab the arm of a person who is blind – if he or she needs guidance. If the person has a guide dog, walk on the side opposite the dog. As you are walking, describe the setting, noting any obstacles, such as stairs, or a big crack in the sidewalk. Also, don’t touch the person’s cane or guide dog. The dog is working and needs to concentrate, and, like a wheelchair, the cane is a part of the individual’s personal space.
- 8) Before speaking to a person who is deaf or hard of hearing, make sure that you have his or her attention and that he or she can clearly see your mouth. This will help him or her to read your lips if necessary. Rephrase, rather than repeat, sentences that the person doesn’t understand. Speak clearly and avoid chewing gum.
- 9) When talking to a person with mental retardation, speak in clear sentences using simple words. Help him or her to understand a complicated idea by breaking it down into smaller parts. Take your cue from him or her to gauge the pace, complexity, and vocabulary of the speech you use. Be patient when waiting for a person with mental retardation to answer your question. It can be difficult for them to make quick decisions.
- 10) Remember – people with disabilities are individuals with families, jobs, hobbies, likes and dislikes, and problems and joys, just like you!