

NU State Museum rebounds from budget-driven reorganization

Academics, research and public events all getting much-needed boost

Priscilla Grew, director of the University of Nebraska State Museum, acknowledges that the museum has weathered a torrential budgetary storm over the past year. She knows all too well that the storm entailed the painful elimination from the museum of tenured faculty and many professional staff, along with a series of uncomfortable restructuring moves.

But now she wants the general public and the university community to understand that the museum survived its funding tempest.

On March 10, Grew spoke on the museum's future as part of the School of Natural Resources Seminar series on East Campus and dispelled myths about the museum's demise and assured listeners that the museum and its many amenities still serve the state.

"I wanted to give people an update about what I see as the future of the museum," she said in a subsequent interview.

In terms of research and academics, Grew said, the museum is showing many signs of recovery and future vitality.

For example, she mentioned the 33rd Annual North American Symposium on Bat Research that Patricia Freeman hosted on campus in October.

Freeman, who now holds a position in the School of Natural Resources, as well as being curator of zoology for the museum, organized the convention that 247 people, varying from professionals to local educators, attended.

In addition, Andrew Smith, a research assistant professor in the museum, received a \$300,000 grant from the National Science Foundation in December for research on scarab beetles in Chile and Argentina.

The Central States Entomological Society also selected the university as the site for its 80th annual meeting in April.

"Mary Liz Jameson, research associate professor in the museum, is president of the society, and I am delighted she has brought this conference to Lincoln," Grew said.

Grew attributed a good deal of the museum's tenacity to the remarkable spirit of generosity that pervades its staff and faculty.

"These people are so incredibly devoted to the well-being of the museum," she said.

Grew cited Greg Brown, the former chief preparatory and casting specialist with 25 years in the museum, as an example of this pervasive inclination to give. Brown formerly was the full-time chief preparator in vertebrate paleontology. Following the budget cuts, he was rehired half-time for one year as a preparator, Grew said.

In spite of losing his full-time position and being rehired temporarily part-time in a lower position, Brown decided to volunteer his time to develop a substantial web project entitled "Nebraska County Fossils." The website, <http://www.museum.unl.edu/research/vertpaleo/NECounties/>, details fossils by selected counties, with more on the way, and has been applauded by museums across the country.

Thanks to volunteers like Brown and other devoted employees dedicated to the museum, Grew said, the NU State Museum has a bright future.

"One of the major obstacles has been the public perception that the museum is closed," she said.

The original budget plans suggested a reduction of museum hours, but the proposal was eventually rejected, Grew said. Nonetheless, she said, museum attendance fell shortly after the proposed cuts as rumors of the closing spread. Attendance in the last six months of 2003 was 20 to 25 percent below comparable months of 2002.

To combat these misperceptions, Grew said, the museum has started several outreach and public relations campaigns to



Volunteers and donors are important to the NU State Museum. In February, Donald McBride of Omaha (center) gave a mastodon leg bone and the rest of his lifetime fossil collection to the museum. McBride presents the leg bone to Priscilla Grew, museum director (left) and Mike Voorhies, curator of vertebrate paleontology. (Photo courtesy of NU State Museum.)

disseminate accurate information about the museum and its programs.

One of these endeavors was the Feb. 21 Dinosaur Detectives event, a cooperative project between the Lincoln Children's Museum and the NU State Museum.

About 1,400 children and adults attended to learn about paleontology. Meanwhile, organizers hope their parents discovered that Morrill Hall and its dinosaur gallery are still open, she said.

In conjunction with the physics and astronomy department, ROTC and other organizers, Grew said, the museum hosted another educational event on April 18: Astronomy Day. That event featured a special lecture from a scientist on the Mars Rover team and three planetarium shows, she said.

Museum personnel have also tried to use the Mueller Planetarium to boost the museum's visibility, Grew said. The planetarium offered a free viewing of the Mars Rover landing that drew an overflow crowd. Another special attraction is the new ViewSpace exhibit in Morrill Hall, featuring dramatic color images from the Hubble Space Telescope.

The museum's public relation's efforts will soon include ads developed by UNL

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advertising students, she said. The museum has also redesigned its website, <http://www-museum.unl.edu/>, to attract more visitors.

If museum attendance is an accurate indicator of the effect of these programs, Grew said, they may be starting to work: February 2004 museum attendance exceeded attendance in February 2003.

In spite of these improvements and others, Grew said, the Museum faces significant challenges in maintaining research collections with reduced professional staff.

The original budget cut plan suggested transferring the Museum's zoology and anthropology collections through deaccession, long-term loan, or inter-university transfer.

If these historic collections were lost, Grew said, the museum would never be able to replace them at a time of better budgets. To avoid such a predicament, the museum will struggle to find funds from donations and grants to preserve the collections until the state budget improves, she said.

"I am trying to avoid any irreversible actions that Nebraskans would later regret," she said. ✨

— by George Green,
editorial assistant, SNR

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