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**MPMA Education Committee  
2021 Award for Excellence in Programming**

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**The Mountain-Plains Museums Association (MPMA)** is pleased to announce the recipients of the 2021 MPMA Awards. Established in 1953, MPMA is a regional museum association that provides services to museum professionals in ten states: Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming. MPMA is one of six regional associations in the United States that work in conjunction with the American Association of Museums.

MPMA's Education Committee annually recognizes institutions within the region that deliver innovative, creative, and excellent educational programs. The 2021 EdCom Award for Excellence in Programming has been awarded to two institutions, The Western Heritage Center and the Moss Mansion in Billings, Montana, that have partnered to offer students (grade 4-8) the unique opportunity to work behind-the-scenes at each museum. During their 20-hour minimum volunteer schedule, students learn customer service skills, participate in museum object management, and gain behind-the-scenes access. The program concludes with a student-developed exhibition featuring their favorite objects from the summer.

After noting an increased interest with various school-aged groups, the Western Heritage Center and the Moss Mansion decided that offering a youth volunteer program could further enrich the education of local youth, especially in terms of learning about local history and culture. The Billings Youth Volunteer Program was established in 2019 to provide Billings' youth the unique opportunity to work in museum spaces. The program's goals included educating participants of the numerous roles and duties associated with the museum, the importance of museums in the local community, and the value of supporting museum efforts. Secondary goals included providing unique summer programming opportunities and aiding participants to become museum ambassadors to their peers.

Students participating in the Billings Youth Volunteer Program split their summer volunteer hours between the Moss Mansion and the Western Heritage Center. At the Moss, a historic house museum focusing on the Moss family time in the home the 1890s through the 1970s, students assist visitors in navigating the home and the stories associated with the family. Youth volunteers receive training to pair learned customer service skills with appropriate historic information to provide unique

interpretive experiences to each guest. At the Western Heritage Center, students work closely with the Collections Manager to manage the Center's extensive object collection. The volunteers receive object handling and cleaning training to assist in object accessions, updating storage housing, and exhibition installation. The summer program concludes with a student-developed exhibit featuring their favorite objects from each site. Students select their object, write the corresponding label, and assist museum staff to design and install the exhibit. Throughout the month of August, students are encouraged to bring friends and family to each site to share their summer experience.

The budget for this program remains relatively low. Hard costs include snacks for new participant orientation and training and for printing and mounting the final exhibit labels. Staff time is the most extensive portion of the budget. However, surprisingly, student volunteers require approximately the same time commitment as adult volunteers. Admittedly, for some tasks, student volunteers require less time for training and management.

While many museums have volunteer programs established for teenagers, few have a program in place for elementary and middle school students. Although working with younger students has its own challenges, the Western Heritage Center and the Moss Mansion find the rewards more than worth the effort. Program participants are illustrating a dedication and commitment to their volunteer duties that even surpasses that of adult volunteers. Students are excited for their unique access to museum spaces, and the application of critical thinking skills and ability to interact with non-familial adult authority figures is aiding their school and extra-curricular opportunities.

Through this program, students are becoming dedicated museum advocates. Their work with irreplaceable museum objects helps illustrate the trust and responsibility inherent in their role, and they rise to the occasion daily.

The Western Heritage Center and the Moss Mansion will continue the Billings Youth Volunteer Program over subsequent summers with the option for other local museums to join if interested. The level of work and commitment illustrated by previous participants have convinced current administrators of the value and potential of the program moving forward. Current program directors hope to expand participant numbers and opportunities while maintaining the current level of involvement and success.

MPMA EdCom Awards Chair, Jennifer Romanoski, announced the award during the Committee's lunch at MPMA's annual conference in Sioux Falls, South Dakota on October 6, 2021.