



## ***Museums in Strange Places*** **“A Secular Gathering Place: The Sandy Spring Museum”** **(S02/E06)**

### **Episode Description:**

The Sandy Spring Museum describes itself as “community-activated.” They want to be a secular gathering places, where people of different backgrounds can come together and build a sense of place and belonging. I visit the museum to speak with Executive Director Allison Weiss about the museum’s radically community-driven programming, the Quaker principles built into the museum’s design, and how they are trying to serve a community of incredible diversity.

This episode is sponsored by [The Lyndhurst Group](#).

Music in this episode is by *Los Hijo 'e Plena*, the musical arm of the community-building nonprofit [Cultural Plenera](#).

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**Hannah (Scripted):** *There are over 400 museums in Maryland. When I decided to do a podcast season about them, I could only pick twenty to visit. I needed help narrowing down my list. So, I wrote to museum professionals in Maryland asking which institutions I couldn’t miss and who was doing really innovative and important things in the field.*

*Certain names kept coming up. One that surprised me was the Sandy Spring Museum, a local institution in Sandy Spring, Maryland, a small suburb I’d never heard of before. What was so special about this small community museum that was worth sharing with the whole world? They call themselves a community-activated museum, and their website home page is dedicated to an open call for anyone in the community to propose and host a program. My curiosity was piqued, and I had to find out more...*

**Allison Weiss:** We call this a secular gathering place because people tend to gather with people who, you know, they look like them, they speak the same language as them, they have the same religion, and we're trying to bring different people together. So we, we call this a secular gathering place.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *That's Allison Weiss, Executive Director of the Sandy Spring Museum.*

**Allison Weiss:** So Sandy Spring is about 12 miles north of the DC border and it was once a very rural community. In about the 1980s it started to develop pretty heavily and the population has grown. So now it's, it's basically, to a large extent, it's a commuter town for people working in DC. It's a lot like Washington DC, there's people from all over the world living in this, in this community, which really surprises people how diverse the community is. If, if you drove up on New Hampshire and you saw all the different houses of worship, um, New Hampshire Avenue is called on that stretch, it's called the highway to heaven, to be funny. I alone, past a Ukrainian Orthodox church. And then within eyesight of that was a Muslim community center and then a Lutheran Church and you said there was a Buddhist temple and a Hindu center as well. So that's kind of, that's a lot in a, in a suburb even, even in you know, more diverse communities in Maryland to have that kind of visual representation is, it says something about the community.

[MUSIC]

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**Hannah (Scripted):**

*Welcome to Museums in Strange Places. I'm your host, Hannah Hethmon.*

*Museums are the keepers of our history and culture, but they are also reflections of who we are now. In each season of this podcast, I explore a different country, state, or region through its museums. In Season 1, I traveled around Iceland, and now I'm visiting the museums of Maryland to discover how they reflect and shape this state's unique identity.*

*This episode is sponsored by the Lyndhurst Group.*

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**Allison Weiss:** So the museum was founded in 1980 by a group of volunteers who saw that the material culture of the community was literally being sold. One of those people was an auctioneer. So he saw that when, uh, people died, he was personally selling the community's history. So he got a group of people together to start a history museum. And the museum was run out of the basement of Sandy Spring Bank for a number of years, then moved to a historic home. And then this property was donated to the museum foundation. And this building was built here in, I think the construction was completed in 1997. So we've been here since then.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *The town of Sandy Spring today is unique in its multicultural makeup, but its history is interesting as well, and worth exploring for a moment, as the legacy of the community's early members can still be seen in the museum's mission. The first Europeans to settle the area were members of the Religious Society of Friends. These settlers, better known as Quakers, founded a community here in 1720. In 1814 they built a new Meeting House next to the fresh-water Sandy Spring, which is still the geographic center point of the Sandy Spring neighborhood and still holds regular Quaker meetings. According to local lore, the six-mile radius of Sandy Spring marks the furthest away individual Quaker families could live and still travel back and forth to the meeting house in a single day.*

*Quakerism is an interesting Christian denomination born in England in the 1600s. They do not have any fixed doctrine or creed that guides their faith; instead they share common religious ideals and experiences and individually seek out divine guidance. And unlike many Christian branches, they believe in the inherent goodness of humanity. Some Quakers look primarily to the Christian religion for guidance, but many find more guidance in the teachings of Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and the nature religions. Since their founding, Quakers have gathered in meeting houses to silently reflect with friends, as they call each other, and share their unique insights into the divine.*

*Today, greater Sandy Spring has expanded to include a network of about a dozen rural towns, with the Quaker Meeting house still at the center. When the Sandy Spring Museum got its own purpose-built space in 1997, its designers looked back to the town's legacy of community, creating a space that's perfectly suited for a new modern model of community-focused museum operation.*

**Hannah:** So tell me about the building here...this is where we kind of start to notice that it's, it's not set up like a traditional, more of a traditional gallery and there's a lot of different spaces here.

**Allison Weiss:** Right. So everybody who comes in and said, well, what was this originally? But it was actually designed to be a museum, but a very non traditional museum. A lot of the people who were involved since the beginning of the organization were Quakers, and Quakers of course have a tradition of their monthly meetings and this was seen as trying to be evocative of the simplicity of Quaker architecture, but also the welcoming sense, that there's a lot of gathering spaces inside this building, and the people who designed the buildings always intended the museum to be a gathering place.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *The story of the museum's founding is a common one in the US. Americans often have a strong sense of pride in our local identities; it's why we have over 10,000 history museums in our country. Many of them are small, locally oriented institutions, founded by a few people in the community who had the foresight to start preserving its history before it disappeared. But unlike many traditional museums founded on local history, the Sandy Spring Museum soon evolved to better serve other needs in its community:*

**Allison Weiss:** It had a very small appeal being just a traditional history museum, you know, people might come to an exhibit once, but they don't have a reason to come back time after time. And most museums now, as you know, are program-driven. So we decided to go to a community-generated model, which means that at least half of what we do, probably more than that, are ideas that come from

the community. They need a space to, um, you know, they have a great idea for an exhibit. They have a great idea for a program. They have a lecture that they want to do. They have a book signing, and they need a space to do it, and they need help professionalizing, like they might need help marketing. They've probably never curated an exhibit before. So they need help with that, they need help with program registration, so we provide this professional infrastructure to the community and then the community really brings their own audience. So, you know, we might have interfaith programs that brings one group of people, then we might have something on, um, there's going to be a Korean exhibit coming up, so maybe that brings in a very large Korean population. So they're bringing their own audience, plus we're marketing things to our sort of core audience. Um, so again, it's that idea of bringing a lot of different people together.

**Hannah:** This first gallery kind of embodies a lot of what you're talking about. So would you tell me what exhibit is in here and what we're looking at?

**Allison Weiss:** Sure. This is called *Uprooted: The Art of Refugees*. And you're right, it does embody a couple of different things that we're trying to do with our mission. Um, the idea for the exhibit was generated by a community member who manages an apartment building where a lot of refugees were resettled and, and the story is even deeper than that. It was at a time when a lot of places didn't want refugees moving into their buildings. This was about 20 years ago and he welcomes people with open arms, became close friends with a lot of people there, ended up employing a lot of the people who lived in his buildings and happened to discover that a lot of them were professionally trained artists, but when they moved to the United States, as refugees, you know, they had to do whatever they could to make a living. And um, most of them were not artists anymore in any kind of way that they could be, um, supporting themselves. So he came to me and said, what if we did an exhibit of the art of refugees? And I just, I love that idea. Love the idea that it came from him. I love the idea that it serves a social purpose because there's so much controversy now in the news about whether or not we should be letting in refugees and and you know, there's a lot of people who are very anti immigrant now. I want the museum to send a very strong message that we are here for everybody. Everybody is considered to be a contributor to the community. Everybody's contributing to the life of the community and I think this exhibit really sends that message.

**Hannah:** And the work is absolutely stunning. Like you could put this on at a fine arts gallery and tell people it's only professionally trained working artists at the top of their game in the DC area and I think people will believe that it..I told you what, I sort of saw this. There's one painting that if I had I \$700 laying around, I would take that home immediately and you do have these paintings for sale, so it's not just a showcase of the art. It's a showcase of, of working artists in a sense.

**Allison Weiss:** Yes. So we, we always try to... All of our programs are when, when, you know, we want the artists to benefit from these programs. And so we, again, like I said, we do a lot in terms of trying to help provide the infrastructure. So in this particular case, um, yeah, we sold a lot of painting so I'm thrilled for the artists that they were able to sell paintings here.

**Hannah:** Would you tell me about your favorite painting in here and why you love it?

**Allison Weiss:** That's a hard one. I have a lot of favorite ones. Um, so I was a peace corps volunteer in Sierra Leone, so I think I'm really taken by the work of a woman whose name is Fetun. She's from Ethiopia and she does a lot of pictures of, of who she called market women, and they're, they're just these wonderful women doing sort of everyday thing. They're carrying calabashes. They're selling things in the marketplace and their dresses are all collages of, um, like supermarket...like sale guides, like the coupon books. The coupon from supermarkets. I'm not actually sure whether or not they're there from Ethiopia or they're from the United States or they're just really, really, really old because they have a kind of funny dated look to them, but her work is just, it just captures my experience, having lived in Africa.

**Hannah:** It is very vibrant and she's got them kind of organized by color. So this woman on the left has this beautiful red dress. And, and of course when you look from afar, it just seems like swatches of paint, um, or, or kind of, it's reminiscent of the patterns of a lot of Ethiopian fabrics and stuff. When you look close, it's little cutouts for Fruit Loops and crayons and Diet Coke. And uh, another one is a hot pockets and a cheap wine and a peanut, Peter Pan peanut butter. So, um, these things that are very, I think it's a very interesting combination. That's very. Yes. You kind of want to sit and look it for awhile.

**Allison Weiss:** Yeah, and most of the artists did it, combination of, you know, some are things that came to them since they lived in the United States. Some, some of them obviously are things that were a result of having lived in another country, and some of them are actually about the experience of immigration. So it's crossing that divider between your home country and your new country.

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[SPONSOR BREAK]

**Hannah (Scripted):** *I want to take a quick break to talk out about this episode's sponsor--the Lyndhurst Group. Are you trying to build stronger communities through your history organization or museum? Do you wonder if your organization is working as efficiently as possible? Bob Beatty and the Lyndhurst Group can help with organizational assessments and in-depth strategic planning. I've known Bob for a few years now, and I've long been impressed by his passion for our field and commitment to making it stronger. If you need help with your history organization, I highly recommend giving visiting [lyndhurstgroup.org](http://lyndhurstgroup.org) to learn more about how the Bob Beatty and the Lyndhurst Group can help make your institution the asset your community wants and needs.*

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**Hannah (Scripted):** *Museum mission statements are often rather boring to read. Not Sandy Spring's: "We gather community to build a sense of place and belonging." And it's not just a statement. It's visible in the architecture of the building, the exhibits, even in the courtyard, where the museum garden club has been gathering for 20 years to plant and tend a gorgeous flower garden.*

*Turns out the museum's Vision statement is good reading as well: "We provide the environment and inspiration for artists and community members to create and host events, performances, activities, and exhibits that engage, stimulate, and bring people together."*

*One of the ways the Sandy Spring Museum realizes this vision is through their artist studios. Spread throughout the museum building are nine artists' studios where 11 artists in residence have 24 hour access to beautiful spaces to practice their art.*

*Allison wanted to me to meet as many of them as possible during my visit. To her, these artists were as much a part of the museum as the exhibits or collection. So we wandered around the museum and out to their renovated historic barn to meet the artists and see what they were working on.*

**Allison Weiss:** They're all working artists. They're all doing their own thing, um, we have that working in a variety of medium, and they're all allowed to use, uh, the museum's collection, um, as a source of inspiration. So we try to make that very accessible. Some of them use the collection in...We have an enamelist who's used the collection in a lot of different ways and sometimes we have painters that years, you know, photographs or, or even objects. We once had a group of painters who had a still life setup in the exhibit hall for about three months and they came in once a week and painted from the objects in our collection. So we really try to integrate the artists with the collection.

**Hannah:** Let's, uh, let's meet some of our artists....

**Hannah** Good morning.

**Julie Smith:** Sorry for the mess!

**Hannah:** Well, we're, we're only recording audio so we can't see the mess. So do you want to go ahead and clarify that it's very clean and tidy and

**Julie Smith:** You can ascribe to make it as clean and tidy as possible. My name is Julie Smith and I'm not. That's good. It's fine. an artist in residence here at the Sandy Spring Museum and just love it.

**Hannah:** How long have you been working at the studio space? Since April. What kind of work are you

**Julie Smith:** I work in acrylic and I paint both in representational style which means you can see what it is and also abstract which is nonrepresentational and for those I mostly use collage which makes a huge mess.

**Hannah:** That's why it's so clean in here.

**Julie Smith:** You are so kind!

**Hannah:** Tell me about some of your inspirations. I see a lot of nature coming through here.

**Julie Smith:** Yes, well I'm. I'm really, really attracted to bison because of their iconic shape, but more importantly, my favorite art in all the world is cave art, and so I, whenever I paint a bison, I feel a direct connection to the people who painted them 30,000 years ago on cave walls. But that's what I do, and one of the wonderful things about working here and having a studio here is that if I get stuck or I'm in a creative log jam, I can just walk around this place and become inspired by what I see on the walls or the wonderful people that work here.

**Hannah:** Do people who are visiting pop in and look at your art and talk to you during the day?

**Julie Smith:** Yes, absolutely. In fact, I've even sold a couple of pieces of art.

**Hannah:** Well, that's a win, right? Oh, I love her work.

**Allison Weiss:** So she does a lot of things. Social commentaries. Um, so she, I think she changes the pictures in her studio pretty frequently because last time I was in it was a completely different set of pictures.

[Sounds of walking to the next studio]

**Eun Ju Lee:** My name is Eun Ju Lee. I work silver, mostly silver, sterling silver and fine silver creating jewelry, sculptures, and some mixed media.

**Hannah:** What are you working on right now? You have this incredible a working space contraption going on. So I'm kind of curious what's going on?

**Eun Ju Lee:** Um, soldering.... everything is soldered. So this is what I'm working on right now.

**Hannah:** They kind of look like sea urchins. like a beautiful set of armor for a sea urchin.

**Eun Ju Lee:** Yes. Yes. I mean it's, you know, it depends on who, who's looking at it.

**Hannah:** Tell me about this right here. What is this? We've got a little stickman made out of silver on a block of wood. What is this?

**Eun Ju Lee:** This is my son's drawing. When he visit me, he likes to sit, pretend he's the artist. So he draw, he draw, if you see here, he draw there, and this is one of his three eye man, and, and I want to make something out of it. And I, and I was at the beginning, I was making like a 2D but this.... has to be standing up.

**Hannah:** It's really something special is bring his little art to life. I bet he loved seeing that.

**Eun Ju Lee:** Yeah. How's my piece of going...

**Hannah:** A patron with a deadline?

**Hannah:** How long have you been working in the space?

**Eun Ju Lee:** Oh, this space is going to be 5 years. Yes. It's July, right? It's been five years.

**Hannah:** Lovely. Awesome. We're going to move on. Good luck with your projects today.

I love that, There's just, we have to walk through the whole building. There's little artist tucked in everywhere. Exactly. You never know where you'll find an artist.

**[Walking and then knocking and door opening]**

**Patricia Powell Kessler :** My name is Patricia Powell Kessler Kessler and this is the second year that I've been here at the museum.

**Hannah:** And before that you were teaching?

**Patricia Powell Kessler :** Yes, I taught and I also had a career in museums. And uh, I've also been a designer and I've also had businesses and everything else that everybody does if you're a mother and you're creative.

**Hannah:** So this is a cool space. We've got brick floors, big beams. And the first thing you see when you come in is this incredible work of art. What is that six feet tall? Uh, would you tell me what's going on here? Because I just love it.

**Patricia Powell Kessler:** Well, a lot of my family are from the West, and we've had a lot of occasions to have massive forest fires throughout the West. And it is a plague. And every time I hear report of a fire, I'm like a little puppy dog. It's like I start to shiver, and it was curious. I had done a fire painting and it was in my house and I told my husband I wanted to redo it. He said No. The next day I came and there was a young man who was taking down his sculpture from the Sculpture Park, Grant McFarland. And these one, two, three, four, five panels were part of his sculpture. It is covered in tar, it's a very, uh, a heavy duty piece. He was cutting it up the pieces to take it to the dump. And I looked at him, and I said, do you mind if I have them? He said, no, you're saving me a lot of effort. And because it was coated with tar, it was just perfect for my fire painting. And I think you have to have this kind of scale to kind of get that energy, that sense of a destruction.

**Hannah:** Yeah. It looks like the river is on fire. And I think that... Is that the tar...

**Patricia Powell Kessler :** Yes, it looks sooty and black up top, so that's really cool. So I incorporated the tar.



[Sound of footsteps as we go to another studio, knocking, background classical music.]

**Hannah:** Okay. So we're in, in the clay studio that you share with three people, right? Or two other people, two other artists.

**Robin Zeik:** Three others Wow. This is Robin Zeik, and uh, I'm one of four potters at Sandy Spring Clay Works. And we have Karen Blynn, Pam Reid, and Jean Fletcher.

**Hannah:** And what do you, what are you working on right now?

**Robin Zeik:** Well, right now I'm got a challenge for a series of bowls that are pretty much all the same shape. So small and large, and today I just threw a large one but I'm trying to work on handles. So uh, I thought I would throw some handles for it as well. So that's kind of fun. So this is sort of the noisy part of clay. I'm trying to get it into shape before you throw it because everything about throwing on the wheel is round, everything about it. So you try to start with your clay as round as possible.

**Hannah:** How long have you been working in this space?

**Robin Zeik:** Oh, we've been here I think three years now, which has been wonderful. Um, We all used to work at workup at Ross Body community center, which is in Sandy Spring. And would they closed for renovation, and at the same time the museum was looking for artists to come in rent studio space and it was such perfect timing. It was perfect. So here we are and um, and we love it. We completely love the space. It's, it's been, um, you know, it's a great community and you know, there's just so much support because the arts all speak the same language. It's really nice. So that's what we're doing. And the nice thing about being in a group studio is we all do different kinds of work. So Jean, for example, does wood-fire and Pam does wood-fire. We have electric kilns here, but the effects are very different. So anybody who comes to our studio will see the whole range of ceramic art. It's really amazing.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *After meeting the artists, Allison and I head back into the main entrance of the museum, where I ask her about the future of the Sandy Spring Museum.*

**Hannah:** What's the vision for the future?

**Allison Weiss:** Right, So, um, that's a really good question because, um, when I first got here, the museum had been operating at a deficit for seven straight years and for four of the last five years we have operated in the black, so everybody is really on a high and I feel like we'd anticipated a lot of trends that were happening in the museum field in general that things really needed to be more community oriented and you needed to get people participating. And I feel like our challenge now is predicting that question that you're asking: what does the next five to 10 years hold for us. I think we need to be thinking ahead and we're trying to figure out what, what the trends are. So I can't tell you right this second what, what I think the trends are. But um, we're really trying to strengthen the community driven part of it and let a lot more people know that we're here to provide that service. It's been something

that we've sort of sought out the community partnerships, and now I feel like we have enough awareness that people are seeking us out. And we really hope to build upon that.

**Hannah: And** so I guess as the community changes....so really the more the better question will be, what will Sandy Spring look like in, in five to 10 years. And that will determine, hopefully that will be... determine what the museum looks like.

**Allison Weiss:** I think we all have to be doing that. We all have to reflect our communities.

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**Hannah (Scripted):** *Thanks for joining me on this adventure as I explore Maryland's museums. Today's episode was sponsored by The Lyndhurst Group. If you enjoy Museums in Strange Places, please help me keep it going by leaving a review on iTunes or sharing this episode with a friend.*

*Music in this episode is by Los Hijo 'e Plena. This Maryland based band plays the traditional bomba and plena music of Puerto Rico and, through their nonprofit, Cultura Plenera, they use this musical heritage to build community. They are also collaborators with the Sandy Spring Museum, and were introduced to me by the museum's director, Allison Weiss. Find more information about their music along with information and pictures of the Sandy Spring Museum on my website, [hhethmon.com](http://hhethmon.com)*

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