



Hall Monitor

Jessica Hall, the manager of interactivity at the newly launched Newseum, is pleased to report that journalism has never been this much fun.

BY JOHN GREENYA

As the Newseum opens its doors in a new location after a five-year furlough, no one there is sporting a prouder smile than Jessica Hall. Not just because the seven-story, 250,000-square-foot facility is magnificent; the museum's content is, too. And Hall, a 29-year-old producer in its broadcasting department, is the project manager of the five-member multimedia team that's reimagining the interactive favorites from the original site, as well as creating a slew of bell-ringing, whistle-blowing new models. She and her fellow techies designed the online exhibits and

IAs—museum-speak for interactive devices—as well as scripted, acted out and built nearly every one of them on-site. Thanks to their efforts, the Newseum's interactives promise to be even bigger and better than before.

In 1997 the Freedom Forum, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, opened the original museum as an interactive space dedicated to the history and practice of reporting the news, dubbing it the Newseum. Despite its location—across Key Bridge in Rosslyn, Va., which is not exactly Museum Row—the Newseum's former incarnation was so successful that by the time space constraints forced it to close in 2002, it had attracted more than 2.25 million visitors. Proving that even museums have to be careful what they wish for (lest they get it), some

exhibits—such as the traveling Pulitzer Prize show, which featured all the photos that have won a Pulitzer—were so popular that in order to control the crowds, the Newseum had to issue tickets for specific hours.

The doors of the old museum had barely closed when the planning began for the new one. There was talk of moving it to New York City, but when the Freedom Forum learned there was a non-historic site left on Pennsylvania Avenue, halfway between the Capitol and the White House, it quickly made a deal. Since then, the Newseum-in-waiting has concentrated its efforts on creating a building that would rock the museum world. "We are building a dramatically new and different Newseum," said Charles L. Overby, chairman and chief executive officer. "The architecture alone will draw people

to this site, but the state-of-the-art content inside will draw visitors of all ages."

Enter Jessica Hall. The summer after her first year of college—thanks to her mother, who had heard an announcement on the radio—the Arlington, Va., resident became one of the Newseum's first interns. She says, "I think my background is fairly unique. My bachelor's is in broadcast journalism and my master's [from the University of Edinburgh] is in digital media. So I have a journalism background, a design and new media background, and I was a Smithsonian fellow in museum practice. Put the three together and the Newseum seems like a pretty logical place for me."

During the five years the Newseum was lying fallow, Hall and company were busily updating the old IAs and designing the new.



Hall, photographed at the new space, manages a team of technophiles.

One of the most popular interactive exhibits in the original Newseum was a program called Be a Reporter. Using a touch screen, the visitor "covered" the story and then filed it. If it was good, it got the front page; if it wasn't, the "reporter" got fired.

Be a Reporter was so successful, the interactive team decided to upgrade it (as well as its digital cousin, Be a Photographer) by adding a children's version in the new building. In it, Hall says, "The animals have escaped from the circus, and it's the kids' job to go around and ask questions, collect information and file the story. And, just like the adults, either they get the front page or they get fired. We definitely provide the kids with a real-life experience—if you don't do your job properly, you get canned. Don't take the right photograph? You get chewed out by the photo editor." Hall says that she and her team went through 32 revisions of Be a Reporter before they felt it was finished.

They replicated that effort in the First Amendment Gallery. "We tried to make the First Amendment Gallery fun and accessible, because when you say First Amendment, people think of court cases and schools and the Supreme Court, and lots of wonderful legal terms in Latin. We created a game called Race for Your Rights, where you get to have fun while learning."

Fun is a recurring theme here. For example, prominently engraved in stone on

one wall is a quote from humorist Dave Barry: "TV news can only present the bare bones of a story. It takes a newspaper with its capabilities to present vast amounts of information to render a story truly boring." Still, the serious side of the news predominates. The Journalists' Memorial contains the names of 1,700 journalists around the world who lost their lives pursuing stories; by using the kiosks, a visitor can learn the details of their careers and their deaths.

One of the brand-new exhibits, says Hall, is the Ethics Table, an oval game table that accommodates four players, who, as quickly as possible—using camera recognition technology—ask and answer questions based on ethical problems faced every day in newsrooms. The team that answers the questions correctly and fills in the front page first is the winner. The Ethics Table proved its popularity even before the Newseum reopened. Hall says, "Every time I turned it on to test it, I had to kick people out, saying, 'Come on, I have other things to do. You need to go!'"

Hall boasts of the new museum's greater interactivity. "In addition to Be a Reporter and Be a Photographer, there's Be a TV Reporter. All three were really popular. We decided to take the games that used to be in the old museum and bring them up to date, completely reimagined, because they were made around 1997. I think the number of interac-

tives has more than doubled. We have activities for all ages, a variety of learning styles and a variety of interests. There is something for visitors to do on all seven levels."

Hall is also proud that the Newseum has lived up to what she calls its "huge commitment to technology." Nothing that came into the building was installed until "we were sure we've got it right"—which must have been some job, considering that the building's director of engineering says if they turned everything on at once instead of over a 20-minute staggered sequence, it would blow the power grid.

In today's blog-eat-blog world, it should come as no surprise that museums are adapting to the times. Hall says, "There's been a lot of changes in museum media in the last few years. We've gone from a very limited use of media to a much more integrated, much more dynamic approach, a kind of Web 2.0," the framework behind such popular Internet sites as YouTube and Facebook, "where people are really trying to engage and share their own opinions and start conversations."

The only thing better than visiting the Newseum is working there, according to Hall. "In my line of work, most of the time you do work that pays the bills, sometimes you get to do work that's interesting, and every once in a while you do work that's meaningful. But I get to do really interesting projects, projects that are going to mean something, every day." ☺