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Local families illustrate their origin stories at KMA

By JOYCE CORRIGAN

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Michelle Rakowsky, KMA special events coordinator training the guest services staff for Picture My Journey in the museum's Learning Center.

Margaret Fox Photography

That the word “museum” derives from the original Greek meaning, “shrine of the muses” suggests that museums today are doing more than ever to fulfill that original promise. It’s no longer just come and be inspired by the art you see on the walls, but rather, come, be inspired and create something yourself. The muses are transforming visitors into artists.

With their splendid new exhibition, “ARRIVALS” a five-century span of works depicting American immigration and arrival stories, the Katonah Museum of Art was not content to merely exhibit objects of great aesthetic and historical interest by well-known artists — although it does that exceptionally well. It is also running Picture Our Journey, a concurrent family program in the Community Gallery and Learning Center, where visitors, especially children, are invited to create art inspired by their origin stories in a way that engages meaningfully with the main show.

Next Saturday, Nov. 6, from 11:30 to 4 p.m., communities will come together for an afternoon of artistic expression with activities that explore themes of family heritage and shared American experience. Guest readers from Neighbors Link and the Katonah Village Library will share immigration-centered picture books while visitors are invited to create a family collage with exhibition artist Sara Rahbar and a colorful portrait silhouette with exhibition artist Thuan Vu. Throughout the afternoon, visitors can also listen to guest readers sharing immigration-centered picture books, and explore the “ARRIVALS” exhibition with pop-up activities around the museum

By inviting people to come under one roof to celebrate their unique past — including the struggles and triumphs — as well as embrace the common present, Picture Our Journey aims to create a moment of American unity on a social and local level. “While the main gallery exhibition examines very big questions, like ‘What does it mean to be American?’ for the Community Gallery we wanted to focus on stories of people living locally,” said Emily Handlin, associate curator of exhibitions and programs. “Members of our KMA staff spoke to people who came to the U.S. anywhere from a few years ago to a few decades ago. Their stories make the large themes that “ARRIVALS” tackles more personal and more immediate.” Visitors will have the opportunity to read excerpts from these conversations and then contribute their own stories related to family history, immigration and national identity.

While the KMA’s outreach programs for the local Hispanic immigrant population have long been at the forefront of the community-based education program, the Picture Our Journey staff made a point of gathering stories of immigrants from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East and Latin America. “The different stories explore the struggle to belong in a new country, the pain of separation, and the ties that bind immigrants and their descendants to their country and culture of origin,” said Learning Center Curator Naomi

Leiseroff. “Even though each book ends on a positive note, the stories in them are all poignant and not just about a happy view of their experience. Readers and viewers of the exhibition can see a full expression of emotions depicted in each book.”

“We felt that telling personal yet universal immigration stories through children’s picture books was the best way to introduce to young people some of the very real issues young immigrants to our country face,” Ms. Leiseroff continued. “Six of the eight books in the exhibition are written and illustrated by the artist and tell their story.” At the same time, even families with young children are encouraged to tour the main exhibition.

The KMA will provide a family guide to Picture Our Journey which includes a writing or art activity related to each of the books that will allow them to think about their own family’s history and traditions.

For more information, call 914-232-9555 or visit katonahmuseum.org.

Katonah Museum of Art is located at 134 Jay St, Katonah.