

California Mission System Docents

“You are old but you are fast!”

One of the best life decisions I made was becoming a California Mission Docent. Retired from four decades of college teaching, I turned my energy and enthusiasm for history toward sharing it with others. Mission docents are the human bridge between book studies and the living artifact of California’s twenty-one missions and four presidios. California’s mission system depends upon approximately one thousand docents across the state, to educate and inspire hundreds of thousands of guests each year.

California’s Fourth Grade Teaching Standards include Mission Studies. Thousands of fourth-graders visit the sites every year. Docents have the privilege of imparting information about the daily lives of the native and non-native people who occupied the missions, presidios, ranchos and pueblos. In addition to students, the historic locales attract thousands of others; including families, tours, special interest, and religious groups.

Docents are a category of people who particularly enjoy studying history and narrating it for others. As the most populous state in the union, and one of the most powerful economic engines on the planet, California’s story is a fascinating one. In addition to the Teaching Standards, mission docents explain the important role of the indigenous people who worked with the Spanish padres and soldiers to establish the mission system. The narrative includes the Mission Era as well as the Mexican Era, and carries the story through to statehood.

Across the five years which I have served the Mission San Juan Capistrano guests, I have enjoyed many incredible moments with both the students and the adult guests, but one group of students stands out in my mind. It was almost the end of the school term two years ago. The group I was to lead consisted of 25 students, mostly boys. I expected them to be a bit rambunctious after a long two hour ride from the inner city of Los Angeles. I was right. They were wiggly; pushing, talking, and jumping around. I started with my usual welcome spiel. I took a deep breath and got them into their imaginary “Time Machines” and we set off going backwards in time.

We began the tour at the cow hide. I fought to keep their attention as they touched the fur and wondered if it were a bear? *I thought to myself, “herding cats?”* At the wine fermentation vat I managed to grab their attention, and got them all stomping on imaginary grapes to make the “wine.” Still boisterous; excitement was flowing out of them. As our tour continued, I noticed a shift. Their hands started popping up. They wanted to share. “I read about that in my social studies book!” “I know about the acorns...”

So many hands in the air, so many wanting to tell me what they knew! They were engaged in learning. The process was rowdy and boisterous and beautiful and inspiring. It was magic....they were applying what they already knew and they were bursting at the seams doing it. I was in every teacher’s dream. As the tour wound down, I was on a tight schedule needing to get them to lunch before their adobe brick making class. They knew I was rushing to pack it all in. They began saying, “We don’t care

about lunch. We want to stay with you and learn more about the mission. We're taking you back with us!" As I power-walked them to the lunch tables, I was smiling at their funny suggestions. One young man skipped up ahead of the group to walk with me. He caught up, and exclaimed, "You're old, but you are fast!" With that I burst out laughing!

Volunteering as a mission or presidio docent is some of the best work there is. We invite you to the CMF Docent Roundtable on Thursday February 11 2-4 pm during the CMF Virtual Conference.

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