



Controversial sex exhibit heads to Kitchener museum

After causing a stir in Ottawa and Vancouver, "bold" show will open at The Museum in January

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By Nancy J. White

In Ottawa, it stirred controversy. The traveling museum show "Sex: A Tell-all Exhibition" was too provocative, said critics last year. Even the heritage minister's office got involved.

In Vancouver, it wasn't the show — renamed "Science of Sexuality" — that raised eyebrows this summer, but the ads for it. They were deemed too risqué for city bus shelters.

Next up? Kitchener.

"It's bold and frank and very well done," says David Marskell, CEO of The Museum, about the exhibit. "We are delighted we acquired it." The exhibit opens at the Kitchener museum January 25.

The exhibit, created by the Montreal Science Centre for youngsters 12 and up, is a chance for teens to learn scientific facts about sexuality, rather than misinformation from hearsay or the Internet, says Marskell, who attended the show in Vancouver.

And how will Kitchener respond? "It will be interesting," says Marskell, who has already met with the board of education and the local newspaper about the show.

"I'm comfortable that as long as we handle it respectfully, people here will respond in a positive way," he adds. "This community is very science- and technology-based."

The exhibit answers 100 common questions teens ask, such as "Is this normal?" and "Who am I attracted to?" explains Montreal Science Centre's Louise Julie Bertrand, manager of development and production.

Computer-generated images tell the story of conception. A humorous video describes puberty. A multimedia presentation explains the phases of sex: excitement, plateau, orgasm and resolution.

The erogenous zones of reclining male and female mannequins light up when someone approaches. The mannequins are equipped with motion detectors that turn on ultraviolet lights.

One hundred and fifty life-sized photos of naked males and females from the neck to the thighs display the wide range of human shapes and sizes. "Teens told us they wanted to see the real thing, not photo-shopped models," says Bertrand. An open call for participants had gone out.

From that open call, average citizens talk on video about aspects of their sexual lives, such as how their first sexual encounters happened, how they knew they were gay.

Exhibit planners had worked closely with teens as well as scientific advisers, doctors, nurses, sexologists. One boy told planners that while everyone says wear condoms, nobody explains how to use them. So a short animated how-to video was made.

"It was important to give precise information, to be explicit, but not vulgar or pornographic," says Bertrand.

"Sex: A Tell-all Exhibition" won the Canadian Association of Science Centres' award for a large institution's best exhibit in 2011. Shown at the Montreal Science Centre, the exhibit received positive feedback, says Bertrand, and went to the Saskatchewan Science Centre in Regina without causing disputes.

Then it hit Ottawa. During previews at Canada's Science and Technology Museum, some teachers and parents found parts of the exhibit too provocative. The museum, mostly funded by the federal government, received calls from the office of the Heritage Minister, James Moore.

In a letter to the minister, the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada described the exhibit as "soft pornography" and objected to its promotion of sex without emotional commitment.

"The concerns we heard were about both the nature of the exhibit and the role of the national museum," says Yves St-Onge, the museum's vice-president of public affairs.

"Never in our wildest dreams did we think it would cause such a stir."

The museum raised the age limit for unaccompanied children from 12 to 16, and it removed an animated video about masturbation.

Vancouverites reacted totally differently. In previews, some found the exhibit too hetero-centric, not representative of the transgendered, says Science World's Joann Coggan, manager of community engagement.

But it was the ads that kicked up trouble. Before the exhibit opened, two ads were rejected as too racy for use at city bus stops. One of them showed a woman's legs in casts with a man's legs over hers. The caption read: Orgasms can kill pain.

The rejected ads, however, turned up on social media and then on mainstream television, causing controversy. "The ads had originally been created to attract attention," says Coggan, "and they did."

The Vancouver exhibit's name was changed to "Science of Sexuality" prior to the Ottawa flap because it better represented the show, explains Coggan.

In Toronto, the Ontario Science Centre passed on the show, but not because of the Ottawa ordeal. "That exhibition did not fit into our planning. Nothing against it. We have every intention of dealing with the subject fully in the future," says chief science officer Hooley McLaughlin, pointing out that the Ontario Science Centre often develops its own exhibits.

At Science North in Sudbury, CEO Guy Labine might consider it for a fall or winter slot eventually. The Ottawa publicity doesn't colour his view of the exhibit, he says, but rather how it needs to be presented to the community to prevent a similar flare-up.

In Kitchener, Marskell is planning accompanying programs, perhaps a play and speakers, to attract seniors to the exhibit. The science centres that already hosted the exhibit all reported interest from senior citizens. Marskell has been expanding the demographic reach of the museum, which originally started for children 10 years ago.

"We're a young, bold organization doing great things," he says of the private, non-profit museum.

Youth, however, are still its core audience. He points out the exhibit's timeliness: Some educators are pushing the province to update the sex education curriculum.

He doesn't have an ad campaign yet for the exhibit. But he knows one thing for sure: "It's not going to be, 'For a good time, call...'"

***1912 – 130 rue Albert Street, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1P 5G4
T 613.565.3832 f 613.565.3803 1.866.373.4632***