Good Morning, and welcome to our session, “Getting Started: Involving Your Community in Exhibit Development.” My name is Eugene Dillenburg; I’m an Exhibit Developer at the Science Museum of Minnesota, as well as Midwest Regional Co-Representative for NAME – the National Association for Museum Exhibition, a standing professional committee of AAM. NAME is sponsoring this session, and we are being co-sponsored by the Curator’s Committee, the Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation, and the PR and Marketing Committee. I’d like to start by thanking them all for their support, and urge you to stop by their booths in the Expo this week. The NAME booth, for instance, will be selling the latest issue of their professional journal, *The Exhibitionist*, which features two in-depth articles on this very topic: Working With The Community On Exhibit Development. Copies of the front page are floating around; you may want to pick one up.

The articles tend to be rather theoretical; this morning, we hope to be a little more practical. As chair, my goal was to put together the session I wish someone else had done back around 1997. That was when I started working at the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago on a new exhibit on Philippine coral reefs, due to open in 2003. One of my directives was to assemble and involve a panel of community advisors. No purpose or function was given for this. Marketing saw the committee as a way to access a new audience, and Education certainly saw outreach opportunities, but those activities were both slated for several years in the future. As for Exhibit Development – well, no one knew what we were supposed to do with the community, just that we were supposed to do it. Our hearts, I believe, were in the right place; we just didn’t have a plan.
Our first task was to assemble the advisory group. The Outreach Coordinator was to help us, but she was busy with another exhibit, and as soon as she finished that, she left for another institution. Luckily, our neighbor, The Field Museum, had recently developed an ethnographic exhibit on the Philippines, and they put us in touch with some people who had helped them. So, through happenstance and luck, we managed to get a pretty good group of people together, and started inviting them to comment on our plans.

At first, we got very little in return. None of the advisors were museum people, so they didn’t really know what they were looking at. They didn’t have the language to respond. And, to some degree, they wanted to be polite and not critique our hard work. Our first couple of meetings were full of uncomfortable silences.

The third meeting was much livelier. By then, we’d hit upon the strategy of asking our advisors direct questions rather than general ones, and we learned a great deal. The issues that had concerned us the most didn’t worry our advisors at all, while other issues we had never even considered were of great importance to them.

After several fruitful exchanges, it was time to wrap up exhibit planning and start on production. This, we felt, was the perfect time to “hand-off” the advisors to other departments within the institution – Education, Marketing, etc. – who could capitalize on and carry forward the good will and momentum we had accumulated. Though the advisors were keen to promote their exhibit or organize fund-raising, the other departments in the building weren’t ready for them, or, like us in Exhibits, didn’t know quite what to do. Our last meeting was over two years ago.

With a little help or guidance, we might have been able to avoid this particular comedy of errors. And that’s why we’ve assembled this session – to give all of you the advice and guidance you need to avoid repeating my mistakes, and to create a viable, vibrant collaboration with your communities.

First, we have Ruth Begell, former Director of the Vacaville Museum, and currently the woman with the best museum job in America, Director of the Charles M. Schulz Museum and Research
Center in Santa Rosa, California. Ruth has been working with communities on exhibit projects since 1984, and can offer some historical perspective.

Next, we’ll hear from Kelly Feltault, a folklorist for Cultural Crossings in Silver Spring, Maryland. While the term “community” in museum-speak is often short-hand for an ethnic or geographic definition, Kelly has worked on exhibits that define “community” in very different terms – age, gender, occupation, etc. She will share some of her experiences with us.

Finally, Therese McNichol, President of Ren Associates of Princeton, NJ, will talk about her work on exhibit projects whose themes cut across easily-defined racial or social barriers.

We’re going to try to wrap up quickly so there will be time for dialogue at the end.

One final piece of business – this session IS being audiotaped, even though it does not appear on the order form. If you wish to purchase a tape, you MAY do so.