

‘Joyous and Fun’: DePaul University Humanities Center Unites Public, Academia

Image



For H. Peter Steeves, the curiosity that led to his career as the director of [DePaul University’s Humanities Center](#) and a [DePaul University philosophy professor](#) began in childhood.

“Since the time I was really little, I was interested in the big questions of existence,” Peter says. “What is this all about? How does it all work? How should we be living? What does it all mean?”

An undergraduate background in physics and a doctoral degree in philosophy combined with Peter’s personal ethos of exuberance.

“Thinking about all of these important things — how the universe is put together; how we’re supposed to live here — is supposed to be joyous and fun,” he says.

Now, Peter’s “lecture performances” are transforming the way the general public relates to academia, and transcending silos of academic study.

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“Understanding something means we have to interact with more than just abstract reason,” Peter says. “We want to have scientists and artists and lay people and academicians together, all talking about one thing and coming at it from completely different angles.”

Without silos, discovery grows, Peter says.

“You may be a scientist, but you see a dancer doing something and talking about potential energy. All of a sudden, you come up with an idea for something you can do in the lab,” he says. “Those are the moments that spark radical change. We can only do it together in community.”

From Peter discussing his favourite story, Jon Stone’s *The Monster at the End of This Book* with an actor portraying a life-size Grover, to Peter playing guitar and singing David Bowie’s Five Years, there’s always something unexpected.

And, what is obvious to Peter while preparing an energy “lecture performance” would be unheard of in a traditional lecture.

“Obviously, I need to build a tesla coil so I can shoot eight-foot lightning bolts at me on stage when I talk, and that’s what I did,” he says.

“Breaking down the barrier between the audience and the performer or speaker is really important,” Peter says, describing this “radically interdisciplinary” style.

Peter has also authored nine books. His ninth, [*Being and Showtime*](#), features instructions, including scripts, for others who are interested in recreating a “lecture performance.”

Being and Showtime uses removable cards, holograms, pop-up pages and more to create a feel that’s deliberately different from a traditional book. Even the website features surprises that a reader can discover by clicking “?”.

“If the medium that’s being used has limitations to it, then what if we try to use a different medium to reach out to the public?” Peter asks.

The COVID-19 pandemic required Peter to use different mediums to reach people who attended the Humanities Center’s free community programs, which regularly attracted 150 to 650 guests.

While in-person events and interactive exhibits weren’t options, Peter wasn’t content with small boxes on a computer screen as the best way to replicate the in-person vibe.

Instead, he brought four musicians together to compose new pieces for a CD. Peter also interviewed each artist for an hour, including about 15 minutes of interview highlights for each musical artist on the CD.

Peter designed the CD’s cover, which uses a photo from music photographer Roberta Bayley as its centerpiece, which Roberta licensed to Peter.

“We put together what I hope would be, if somebody listened to it, the audio version of actually being there with us,” he says.

Visual artists also created unique pieces, and Peter shipped out 3D retro viewers to Humanities Center participants along with slides of the artwork.

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Between September 2020 and June 2021, Peter hosted My Brilliant Pen Pal, a series of events featuring correspondence between special guests and audience members.

“You can actually look forward to getting the mail,” he says. “You get this message from somebody who is really smart — at the top of their field — with something really revolutionary and new to say.”

Pen pals included a Black Panther, a mathematician, a poet and a NASA employee. Peter says the pen pals are intentionally chosen to be diverse by race, gender and field of study.

[Jennifer Trosper](#), the deputy project manager at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, was the NASA pen pal. Jennifer is also the manager for the Mars Perseverance Mission.

Ingenuity and its robotic counterparts are designed in a way that appeals to Peter. “They put a lot of thought into the aesthetics of this, and I’m interested in the ways in which the sciences, the arts and the humanities go together,” he says of the NASA team.

Pen pals answer participant questions that Peter selects. Again, curiosity and excitement make for a great question.

“Ask a question that’s from the heart — ‘I really want to know this; I really care about it,’” Peter says. “If that passion shows through, I usually tend to pick questions like that.”