Frida Kahlo: Art, Garden, Life—An exercise in teambuilding and partnerships
Michelle Conklin

What do you do when you have too little staff, money, and space to recreate a monumental exhibition on loan from a much larger, very successful garden such as the New York Botanical Gardens?

1) “Did you hear...?”

Talk it up! That means as soon as the project is confirmed, begin spreading the word. I started by reaching out to the Mexican Consul’s office, the Latin American Committee of the Tucson Museum of Art, the Latin American Department at the University of Arizona and Pima Community College (PCC). This question helped set the stage for #2

2) Ask for help, and look beyond yourself.

Is your staff capable of painting walls, hanging art, or installing plants and new irrigation lines? Most likely, the answer is “yes,” but is that the best use of their time? When you invite others to be a part of the process, you’re setting the stage for deepening or establishing new friendships, potential partnerships—again, for now, and in the future.

When the need arose to locate enough storage to house the contents of a 54’ freight truck for six months, the “talk it up” I did with Pima Community College resulted in our first partnership. In the end, PCC contributed: Free six-month storage in their warehouse; a loan of the entire Theater Arts and Construction Departments to recreate Casa Azul in our space; use of their lecture hall for an opening lecture with New York Botanical Garden designer and Tony Award Winning New York Theater Designer, Scott Pask; and, in-kind printing of visitor maps, rack cards, and lecture invitations. All from a phone call that started with, “did you hear?” At the end of a conversation with Mexican Consul Pineda, discussing how the Consul’s office could help us promote the exhibition to the Mexican-American community and throughout Mexico, Consul Pineda, asked, “What else can we do for you?” A glance around the Mexican Consuls offices gave me an idea: “Would you loan us, for the duration of the exhibit, the exquisite art exhibit that you currently have hanging on your walls?” More than fifty original works with the theme, “My Rights as a Child,” painted and illustrated by Mexican children from all over the world arrived the next day, ready to hang.

3) Be flexible
Midway through the exhibition, Consul Pineda asked if we could host, at a moment’s notice, a children’s symphony from Mexico. Even though there was not enough time to promote it, we put out a chalkboard sign announcing the event at 10 a.m., quickly set out one hundred or so chairs in a pavilion, and soon more than thirty children performed to a standing room only audience. What an unexpected gift to our members and visitors.
I can’t recall just how many times the staff asked, “What do you think of this idea?”, but you could feel the creative juices flowing from everyone: from housekeeping to horticulture. Their input resulted in an entirely new look for the children’s garden, planting designs were enhanced, and even our chicken coop and one little building in our garden railway exhibit got a facelift to replicate Frida Kahlo’s home, Casa Azul.

Always keep in mind your overall final vision, but by inviting input from others, you just may create something even better than you imagined.

**4) The gift that keeps on giving**
Partnering sometimes feels like it’s a one-way street, but it’s not. In recognition of a donation of 42 gallons of paint from Dunn-Edwards Paints, we displayed two small signs that told people where they could order Frida Blue, Diego Red, Pyramid Yellow, or Granizo Green paints. Over 32 gallons of paint were sold throughout the state, resulting in nearly $1,000 in paint sales for Dunn-Edwards Paints.

**5) Continue these new partnerships in the future**
Finally, when it was time to take down the Frida Kahlo exhibit and plan for the installation of Origami in the Gardens2, I made a call to our friends at PCC to help us transform Casa Azul into a Japanese Home and Garden.

And to think, it all began with, “Hey, did you hear about the new exhibit we’re going to open at the Gardens?”

*Michelle Conklin is the Executive Director of Tucson Botanical Garden.*

Photos: Tucson Botanical Garden
PCC students constructed and painted the staging for the exhibit.
Mexican students living abroad were featured in an exhibit loaned to TBG by the Mexican Consulate in Tucson.

Esperanza Azteca Children’s Symphony made a surprise visit. And performed!
Sign recognizing the donor of the paint used in the exhibit—with directions on how to order for visitor’s homes.

The entrance to Casa Azul

Frida’s kitchen was recreated in the Children’s Garden.

PCC students created this building for the exhibit currently on display at TBG—*Origami in the Garden*.