

La Nueva Mayoría

By David R. Jones



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Museum Fees: A New Apartheid

Almost all of New York City's major museums charge admission fees. And those fees are inexorably increasing. The Museum of Modern Art charges \$25 to get in the front door; ten years ago it charged \$12. The Guggenheim charges \$22, the Whitney and the Frick charge \$18. And many cultural institutions charge extra for "special exhibits." The admission fee covering all exhibitions at the American Museum of Natural History is now \$33 for adults and \$20.50 for children. That's over \$100 for a family of four.

Last July, the Metropolitan Museum of Art raised its admission price from \$20 to \$25. Ten years ago, the admission price was less than half. But the Met's admission is "recommended." That is, you can pay anything and get in. It says so in very small print at the admissions desk – so small that many visitors to the museum think they are required to pay the entire \$25 fee.

A few weeks ago, two members of the Met filed a lawsuit against the museum, contending that its fee policy is intended to "deceive and defraud" the public, making them believe that the \$25 fee is mandatory rather than suggested. The object of the suit is to require that entrance to the Met be free; that it not charge any admission fee.

Over the past several decades, we have witnessed a systematic process of denying low- and moderate-income New Yorkers access to public cultural institutions. Instead, millions of New Yorkers – who subsidize these institutions – have been priced out of them.

Major New York cultural institutions are publicly funded, primarily through tax-deductible contributions and city, state, and federal tax dollars. And they pay no property taxes. Since they get city funds, admission should be free, but the violation of the Lease and Free Admission Statute (Chapter 476 of the Laws of 1893) is not enforced.

New York's museums draw millions of visitors to the city from all over the world. Yet many residents of the city cannot afford to enter these institutions. In a survey conducted by the Community Service Society several years ago, 58 percent of low-income New Yorkers said that they rarely visited museums, zoos, or other cultural institutions. When they were

asked why, one in five – which computes to 400,000 low-income New Yorkers - said that these places cost too much.

The American Association of Museums contends that admission fees cover only a fraction of the cost of serving museum visitors. If that is true, then returning to free admissions would mean forgoing only a small amount of income. Public officials could craft innovative tax policies that along with private endowments could reduce and eventually eliminate admission fees.

It has been successfully done in other cities. London’s great museums are free. Many museums across the country do not charge admission fees. The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., the Getty Center in Los Angeles, and the Cleveland Museum of Art are free. So are museums in Minneapolis, Baltimore, St. Louis, and Cincinnati.

The tax dollars of all city residents are being spent to support institutions that only a relatively few can afford. In a city where one-fifth of the population lives in poverty and more than one-third lives in low-income families, these fees promote a separation – a social and economic segregation - that is unhealthy for the well-being of the city.

New York’s museums are our cultural jewels. They should be free to everyone. There was a time when museums in the city were free. Maybe this lawsuit brought against the Met will begin a process to return our great cultural institutions to the public, not just to those who can pay these ever-increasing admission fees.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 168 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.