

**Remarks made by Richard Burkert  
Executive Director of the Johnstown Area Heritage Association  
accepting the 2007 Katherine Coffey Award, October 26, 2007**

I started working with the Johnstown Flood Museum right after graduate school. Before I interviewed for the position, I read David McCullough's gripping history *The Johnstown Flood*. I was enthralled by the story. In fact, that experience rendered me unfit for normal work, and I've never recovered. I have always enjoyed museum work, and I am deeply honored to be recognized by the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums. I would like to begin by thanking those who saw fit to nominate me for this award: Edy Walsh, Deborah Filipi, Dan Ingram, Bob Weible, Lynda Waggoner, Peter Seibert, and Steve Humphrey. Indeed, it was a vast museum conspiracy. Katherine Coffey is remembered as someone who introduced many individuals to the museum field. While I haven't trained so many museum professionals, I do share one characteristic with Katherine Coffey. She was director of the Newark Museum where she served for an amazing 43 years. I have worked for 28 years in same position. While my job has changed over years, I still merit some recognition for persistence, maybe something like a gold watch. In my case, it's more than dedication to an institution or a profession, but also to a place – Johnstown, Pennsylvania. So, I would like to reflect for a few minutes on museums and their communities, and what that has meant for me. If it's lucky, a city gets the museum or museums it needs. Twenty years ago, Johnstown's leaders did not know that what it really needed was more and better museums. The Johnstown Area Heritage Association and its program is, nevertheless, a distinctive product of its environment. I have had the opportunity to work with one community during a period of fundamental change. During my first decade in Johnstown, the city was more focused on economic development and meeting human needs during a period of 25 percent unemployment. The steel industry had been the basis of the town's economy and society for 140 years, and the steel industry was rapidly falling apart. Residents had depended on industry as the basis for a way of life, and that industry had failed them. Consequently, the whole heritage of the steel industry was being repudiated and discarded. The general attitude was tear it all down and quit telling those stories from the past. Indeed, many community leaders advocated that the community minimize its heritage and get on with being the new high-tech and bio-tech Johnstown that it hoped to become. My job has been to remind residents and visitors of the achievements made by previous generations, and the sacrifices they made. Johnstown also needed to remember the greatness that had been and was possible. Our goal was essentially to reappraise the historical and cultural legacy of the community, and support community development based on the preservation and development of these cultural resources. With that approach to the past, it was even possible to position the centennial commemoration of an epic disaster as a positive event for the community. If I have been successful, then I owe my accomplishments to being able to create a long-range vision to unify the work of my organization and provide a strategy for the Johnstown community. The Book of Proverbs says "Where there is no vision, the people perish." The same is true for organizations and communities. In my case, I was lucky to work with Dennis

Frenchman, an architect and planner from Cambridge, Massachusetts, at a critical time in my career and the life of my organization. It was also a critical time in Johnstown's community life, for the city had reached a low point. JAHA was planning a heritage area in Johnstown at the same time that the city planning commission had quit meeting. We created a long-range plan at a time when there wasn't a lot of community planning going on. Further, our plan went far beyond the walls of our museums to include historic districts, walking tours, and even a downtown festival park. Consequently, our success has been greatly increased by allowing other organizations to take ownership of portions of our plan. An example is our successful partnership with the Johnstown Redevelopment Authority, which has built a river-edge pedestrian trail linking historic districts and our museum sites, and has also taken the lead in the preservation of the Cambria Ironworks National Historic Landmark. As important as it's been to have a detailed, 15-year vision, it's also been critical that we be flexible and able respond to new opportunities and constantly changing realities. While many of the assumptions have changed, we are implementing the final pieces of the Johnstown Discovery Network strategy that we first conceived in 1991. Another factor that has made my job so interesting is the strong and compelling stories that are attached to Johnstown. Every place has a story to tell, and we in the museum field need to work with authentic stories and authentic places. Some of these stories are difficult; my institution works with the Johnstown Flood (a horrifying disaster and a nation scandal), the realities of life in an industrial community, and harsh work done in the steel and coal industries. As noted in my introduction, the film my organization produced for the Johnstown Flood Museum won the 1989 Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Subject. While the film is well made, I don't take a lot of credit for the critical recognition that the film received. It won because the story was so powerful, and the director and I didn't get in the way. Likewise, Johnstown's history receives a surprising amount of national media attention because of the strength of its stories. What we have learned is that we need to focus on the authentic stories even if they are painful, and to deal directly with difficult issues and controversy. Our goal in Johnstown has always been to tell these stories not just in museum exhibits, but also using the community itself. We view Johnstown as a raw info source on industry and the way of life in the shadow of the mills. Not only do we go beyond the museum environment to accomplish our mission, but we have deliberately allowed the edges of the museum field be fuzzy. Our program encompasses historic preservation and special events, especially music. We have taken the lead in historic preservation planning in Johnstown even though we're essentially a museum group. We also sponsored the National Folk Festival for 3 years and have presented the Johnstown FolkFest for 15. We are also collaborating with conservation groups who are developing outdoor recreation. Ultimately, we are trying to create a mix of cultural and recreational amenities that will improve quality of life and position Johnstown as a visitor destination. This may not be a useful a strategy for every museum, but it certainly is what was needed in Johnstown. I guess that my greatest satisfaction has been to help build a sense of place in Johnstown. Museums need to help to sustain and enhance the qualities of place in their communities. Much of this comes under the banner of heritage tourism, but it's much more. It's providing a quality of life and

a working mythology for the communities in which we work. I'd like to close by saying that museums do matter. We provide core amenities that build a sense of place and signify the authentic character of our communities. This is exciting and important work. Johnstown has a window of opportunity: there is still a manufacturing base and we have a powerful Congressman. But the infrastructure of Johnstown was created for a much bigger industrial city. Johnstown needs to make the transition to a new economy. The city's image and its cultural amenities will help to position it, along with its natural resources, as a desirable place to live and work. We work with the past, but our goal has always been to build a community with a future. Thank you very much for this recognition.